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Beyond the Naughty Step: The intersections of class and gender in contemporary parenting culture

Tracey Jensen

Abstract

This thesis examines the texture of contemporary parenting culture, examining how 'childrearing', as the activity of raising children, has been rhetorically eclipsed by 'parenting', as a broader orientation towards one's children, oneself and the future. Parenting has been increasingly visualised across culture and policy as both a classless activity and as the key to transcending social inequalities of all kinds. In these visualisations, it is poor parenting which limits and constrains children. Consequently, good, competent or responsible parenting has become imbued cross a range of sites with enormous explanatory power, and is invoked to account for developmental differences in behaviour, vocabulary, and cognition. This thesis critically examines these socio-cultural shifts and explores how parenting discourse is implicated within these drifts away from a sociological imagining of inequality and towards a more psychological account of social change. It pays specific attention to one television programme, Supernanny (Richochet Productions, 2003-), which proved highly popular amongst viewers and highly tenacious in policy circles; a programme in which the staging of 'poor parenting' became an opportunity for both education and entertainment. This thesis pays close attention to the subjectivising encounters between parenting culture and parents. It argues that, far from parenting being a classless activity, it has emerged as a new site for the production of social distinction.

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This thesis is for my mum, Karen.

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Introduction

In this thesis I explore the ways in gender and class are made and re-made through the representation, practice and experience of childrearing. I pay particular attention to recent cultural shifts around definitions of 'childrearing' that reconfigure care and intimacy as objective and learnable sets of skills, capacities and aptitudes and have become known across a range of sites by the gender-neutral moniker 'parenting'. Specifically I look at the growth, transformations and struggles within the parenting advice industry, which I argue is illustrative of the contemporary psychologised and interiorised orientation towards matters of raising children, and at one particular example of this advice, *Supernanny* (Ricochet Productions, 2003-) which has become a powerful televisual shorthand for the neo-liberal discourses underpinning parenting. Using a combination of textual analysis, interviews and the text-in-action method, I explore, with 'ethnographic intentions' (Gray, 1992), how parenting is represented and how it is lived, and how the pathways that subjects are able to draw between these are constrained and facilitated by the complex landscapes of gender, class and race.

The historical context for the thesis - parenting and politics

The matters of parenting have come to form a central plank within the political project of New Labour. In the mid-nineties, under the leadership of Tony Blair, Labour became New

Labour and began the complex business of distinguishing itself from both the New Right and the old left, in order to both retain core voters and attract new ones. This re-invention involved the casting-off of notions such as common ownership, redistribution and collectivism, and their substitution with notions of 'enterprise, partnership, opportunity, community, security and trust' (Levitas, 2005: 112). The emerging discourses of New Labour implied a different kind of citizen from the one who was imagined before. The citizen of yesterday has been rewritten as an outdated passive recipient of welfare and rights, who is assumed to have no place in the renewal of Britain. In (his) place stands the citizen of tomorrow, one who is an active, agentic risk-taker, personally responsible and dynamically committed to becoming flexible and adaptable to the requirements of the modern global economy. New Labour did not offer any guarantees of jobs or job security *per se*; rather they promised to distribute job *opportunities* and *prospects*, and recast job security as an achievement, acquired on an individual basis. The principles of both equality ('the old Left') and freedom ('the New Right') were rhetorically transformed into the more meritocratic principles of 'fairness' and 'opportunity'. It has been argued that this language of personal investment, employability and flexibility has come to constitute a new order of *flexploitation* (Bourdieu, 1999), the consequences of which are now becoming apparent as the global economy enters recession.

As early as 1996, New Labour was developing its stance on how parenting would fit into this vision of society. Keen to distance itself from the moralising crusades of previous Conservative governments, and to signal its vibrant modernity and acumen with changing

family structures, key New Labour spokespeople, especially Jack Straw, pledged to ‘pragmatically’ tolerate diverse family forms, even as they continued to frame certain families such as single parent families as belonging to ‘parenting danger zones’. This pragmatic tolerance existed alongside a continuation of preceding moral underclass discourses that emerged from New Right thinkers such as Charles Murray. Fractured communities and poor parenting were still regarded as the causes of crime and delinquency, and in the discussion document *Parenting*, commitments to ‘good parenting’ were held up as social investments that must be made in order to change the moral climate. It was argued that in order for this climate to flourish, New Labour had to ‘get tough’ with its citizens, just as parents must ‘get tough’ with their children. The time of leniency, as it has been narrated, is over; responsibilities must come before rights. Parental responsibilities in particular had to be fulfilled in exchange for rights – or more accurately, in exchange for ‘opportunities’.

‘Poor parenting’ was subsequently aligned over successive discussion and consultation documents – particularly in the flagship Green paper *Supporting Parents* (Home Office, 1998) – with ‘social exclusion’. This chimes with the discursive shift from concerns about structural inequalities that shape individuals in complex ways to a more simplistic model of inheritance, one which places culture rather than structure as the cause of inequality and considers cultural defects to be transmitted.

In these reconfigurations, the parental citizen is required to develop and rehearse their 'parenting' philosophy through consuming advice, evaluating and adopting appropriate techniques and orienting themselves towards appraising and managing the 'needs' of their children. The purchase and consumption of parenting advice is, as I argue in Chapter 1, nothing new, but what is novel is the institutionalising of these processes as a foundational part of 'active citizenship'. New Labour has signalled its commitment to support its parent citizens in very particular and specific ways, with programmes and schemes that assume a family that is in work, financially independent, and reflexive. It has also signalled its commitment to parenting as a set of skills that are definable and essential; parents that are judged to be performing their parenting role inadequately are now the potential subject of civil orders, including Parenting Orders. These orders compel them to attend instructional programmes to improve these shortcomings, or face having welfare benefits cut or even stopped if they do not comply. I discuss the implications of this collapse of parenting into citizenship (Plummer, 2003; Berlant, 1997) in more detail in Chapter 9, suggesting that it should also alert us to transformations around notions of social mobility. Discourses of poor and good parenting act as significant sites in which 'new individualism' (Murdock, 2000) operates. The successes of the socially mobile middle-classes are increasingly accounted for through reference to the competent upbringing they must have received as children, and correspondingly the structural and systemic nature of inequality is silenced.

The contemporary parenting expertise landscape

If a family is a factory for turning out children then it is lacking in the most elementary safety precautions. There are no guard rails round the dangerous engine the father. There are no safeguards against being scalded by the affections of the mother. No mask is proof against the suffocating atmosphere. One should not be surprised that so many lose their balance and are mangled in the machinery of love.

(Alan Bennett 1994: 338)

Without wanting to either refute *or* support Alan Bennet's lyrical (and rather pessimistic) account of the emotional complexity of the child-producing family-factory, I did want to engage with the notion that parents and parenting is 'in crisis' like never before, and that this crisis needs to be managed. The concept of the family has often been mobilised as a source, guarantee and indicator of social harmony, yet there is a novelty in terms of the intensity to which the minutiae of the intimate relationships produced and lived within it have been opened out to public scrutiny. It was the excessiveness of this visualising of good and bad parenting, and of the ways in which this visibility has and is intersecting with (and remaking) gender and social class that I wanted to explore. The cultural spotlight upon parenting, and of the ways in which good parenting was being mobilised as *the* cause of and solution to social inequality, was demonstrated particularly well in the television programme *Supernanny*. This makeover, or transformational, programme promised to turn ungovernable children and their desperate parents into model families; to literally fix the faults in the family factory.

I identified *Supernanny* as an 'emblematic text or moment' (Couldry, 2000) within these political reconfigurations of meritocracy, opportunity and social inclusion. However comfortably the *Supernanny* vision of tough love, boundaries and discipline chimed with New Labour's parent citizen though, it is important to remember that the genre of self-instructional television, of which *Supernanny* is a part, cannot be understood as a straightforward narrativising of rational techniques for living. It is also a genre that operates through fantasy, emotion, feeling and identification, and as such I pay close attention to the ways in which the discursive underpinnings of this popular text played out in the everyday construction of selves. Influenced by Annette Kuhn's (1995) concept of the 'memory text' – through which she suggests we attend to the ways in which we use texts to construct our own selves and histories – and drawing on my own first ambivalent encounters with the programme, I argue for an ethnographic methodology for cultural studies in Chapter 3.

The intellectual attention that I focus upon *Supernanny* in this thesis is not simply a straightforward reflection of the significance of the programme¹; it is also a reflection of where and how I am located in the world as a subject. The programme was first broadcast in 2003, also the year when I gave birth to my daughter Milly. I was immediately interpellated within the formula it offered for self-management, and caught within the mesh of desirable, responsible, normative family life that was promised by the narrative and echoed in the painful, emotional confessions of participating families. The process of

¹ Although I do of course make a case for its social, cultural and political significance, see Chapters 4 and 9 in particular.

producing this thesis, of the labour of writing, and of watching what felt like hundreds of programmes was tied up always with other kinds of labour and production. Becoming a researcher was intimately wound with becoming a mother, learning the habits and processes of each. In light of this, I argue for a kind of social and cultural 'listening' (Back, 2007) that is also attuned to the frequencies of emotion, the irrational and the skaky; to pay attention to what we are feeling as well as thinking. I would also argue that one does not need to be a parent to be caught within the classed and gendered normativities that are produced here and across other cultural sites.

Adopting such a methodology can lead to the problematic position of arguing that the meaning of any text is produced wholly by how the audience transforms it – that there are as many *Supernannies* as there are *Supernanny* viewers – although the text-in-action sessions I conducted demonstrated that this was far from the case. On the contrary, a clear set of preferred meanings emerged, illustrating cultural competencies (Morley, 1980) and particular investments within different sets of notions of what constituted good parenting. I explore refusals, challenges and criticisms that emanated from parents in response to the programme in more detail in Chapter 7. I found that while *Supernanny* may be hailed by ministers as exemplary of the kind of 'tough love' parenting needed in the neoliberal order of opportunity and mobility, it is not necessarily interpreted as such by parents. I explore how the cultural economy of parenting expertise operates as a class-making exercise; ironically, the judgements surrounding the watching of *Supernanny* (rather than other high-

brow parenting television alternatives, or, even better, reading parenting advice books) are then deployed, particularly by middle-class parents, to legitimate social difference.

I begin by exploring where accounts of parenting advice and of television culture have brought us intellectually, and I sketch out the methodological approach that I take in this thesis. In Chapter 1, I explore different explanations for the enormous growth of the parenting advice industry, focusing particularly on the accounts offered by second-wave feminism and, more recently, by social historians. I argue that neither of these bodies of literature can adequately account for the complex and uneven landscapes of power and knowledge that are produced through parenting advice. Turning to a more recent body of critical feminist theory, I argue that the contemporary parenting advice landscape must be theorized culturally as an expression of a particularly postfeminist sensibility, in which parents (mothers) are exhorted to empower themselves through the consumption of advice. In Chapter 2, I examine the literature that engages with the rise of reality television. I explore some of the economic explanations around this rise, and argue that we cannot reduce their popularity to the economic sphere, and that there is something more complicated going on. I explore how reality television foregrounds emotions and ordinariness, producing what we might think of as an emotional public sphere. I then turn my attention to one reality programme that spotlights family life, and look at the ways in which it can be seen as a text which reproduces discourses of classlessness. I explore how these notions of classlessness, of casting off history and biography and of becoming the neoliberal subject you want to be, are principle in the popularity of this genre.

In Chapter 3, I sketch out my methodological approach. In this thesis, I use a range of methods in an endeavour to go beyond realist cultural studies and to pay attention to the complex self-making that happens in social and cultural encounters. Drawing on poststructuralist theory, I approach the subject discursively and look at what this can bring to cultural studies. I also examine the fall, and subsequent rise of notions of social class, and situate my work within this new scholarship. Social class, I argue, is not simply a matter of economic or employment classification, but is emotionally and culturally textured. I hang the thesis upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and argue here for approaching parenting as a field of social practice.

In Chapter 4, I examine the social and political context of contemporary parenting in which the programme of *Supernanny* was first broadcast. I argue that it is no accident of scheduling that this programme found its audience, but rather that it reflects the significance of parenting in discussions around mobility and social inclusion. I look at the ways in which parenting has come to dominate political discussions of social equality, and how parenting is gendered in political notions of childrearing. I explore how the social investment state is implicated in the production of parenting as a set of skills and competencies, and the synergy between this production and the transformative promises of the programme. In Chapter 5, I pay attention to the psychological vocabularies which subject-making and self-management employ. In sites of self-help, the concept of the pure relationship (Giddens, 1992) has become particularly significant, and I examine in this chapter where this concept

stands empirically and ideologically. I look at the ways in which *Supernanny* requires parents to ask what kind of parent they want to be, and encourages its viewers to think of themselves as neoliberal, psychologised managers of their intimate lives. In Chapter 6, I explore the ways in which both programme and policy decontextualise parenting, and argue for approaching parenting subjects as spatial as well as social subjects. I examine the ethnographic field in which my research participants live, in a suburb of South London. I look at the ways in which this field is gendered, classed and racialised, and the different degrees of comfort and fit within that. I suggest that this neighbourhood is in many ways a terrain which is produced in reference to ideologies of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996) and that it has become parentally gentrified; though not without complex costs.

In Chapter 7, I pay closer attention to the encounters between *Supernanny*, parenting culture and parenting subjects. I explore how in these encounters, social class and gender are themselves made, and how the practice of watching and interpreting was an opportunity for social distinction. In assessing and critiquing the programme, research participants were able to play particular capitals, locate themselves within a cultural hierarchy of parenting advice, and produce themselves as critical masters of parenting discourse. In Chapter 8, I explore how these processes were never clean or straightforward, and using psychosocial theory I pay attention to the messiness of these encounters. They were, I argue, saturated with shame, pleasure, and the ugly feelings of division, projection and obligatory humour.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I examine the claims and counterclaims made around political interventions in parenting. I look at governmental proposals to extend parenting interventions, and how the popularity of the programme has been (mis)read as evidence of a public ‘hunger’ for more parenting advice. I suggest that, rather than seeing the popularity of the programme, and of parenting advice generally, as reflecting unproblematically a hunger and a demand, we need to pay critical attention, as I have done in this thesis, to the ways in which parenting culture plays an active role in reproducing a sense of the ‘family in crisis’. I discuss the evaluation of some of these governmental mechanisms for producing ‘good parents’ and look at how the shift from tackling ‘poverty’ to tackling ‘poor parenting’ intersects with welfare claims and rights. I argue that we need to remain critically attuned to how this production of poor parenting is intimately implicated in wider social and political shifts around inclusion and the remaking of social division and inequality.

Chapter 1 – From Mothercraft to mummylit

If we buy a plant from a horticulturalist we ask him many questions as to its needs, whether it thrives best in sunshine or shade, whether it needs much or little water, what degrees of heat or cold; but when we hold in our arms for the first time, a being of infinite possibilities, in whose wisdom may rest the destiny of a nation, we take it for granted that the laws governing its life, health and happiness are intuitively understood, that there is nothing new to be learned in regard to it.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton¹

In the old days, parents thought of kids like waffles. The first couple might not turn out right, but you could always make more. Now many families have only one or two kids to work with, so they focus all their attention and energy on one or two and want them to do well.

William Damon, director of the Stanford University Centre on Adolescence²

The above quotes, made nearly two centuries apart, illustrate the continuing struggle, in certain contexts, to make sense of the best way to raise children. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a nineteenth century maternal reformist, was among the first of the mothercraft pioneers and

¹ Quoted in Rima Apple, 2006: 25

² Quoted in Barbara Kantrowitz and Peg Tyre (2006), "The Fine Art of Letting Go" in *Newsweek*, 22nd May US Edition

she argued passionately for science to turn its attentions to childrearing. Mothering, as far as Stanton and her peers were concerned, was a complex and fragile business, and it was essential that this business of raising up these 'beings of infinite possibilities' was approached with the utmost care and attention it deserved. The sentiment behind Stanton's impassioned plea can still be heard behind William Damon's mischievous comment about 'waffle children'; the reducing size of the family, he suggests, has led to the increasing value of each child, and this indispensability has itself led to the corresponding intensity of attention that is lavished on each child by modern parents. Both Stanton and Damon voice the modern parenting imperative to 'get it right' with children; to raise them up as well as can be, to prepare them fully for the world, to attend to their needs and invest them with time, energy and love.

The modern parenting imperative, the parental anxiety that this imperative engenders, and the public discussions that both precede and emerge from them are not new, nor are they limited to what might have once been considered the private world of the home and the family. Parenting advice has flourished in a professional form for at least a century, and its discursive roots stretching back even further than that, to at least the seventeenth century.

The history of parenting advice is a complicated lineage of parenting experts whose endlessly transforming dictates have consistently mirrored prevailing anxieties. What is new is the recent, enormous proliferation and saturation of cultural space with parenting advice, and the corresponding mainstreaming of parental anxiety. In 1997, five times as many parenting books were published than were in 1975 (Hulbert, 2003). Writing about

parenting books in the United States, media analysts Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2005) estimate that in the 1970s, four or five new books about motherhood were published each year, but by 1995 this had increased to more than sixty new books each year. In global terms, the book which has sold most copies worldwide in the history of publishing, second only to the Bible, is parenting author Dr Spock's *Baby and Child Care* (1946, now in its eight edition, having never been out of print). The prevalence of public discussions about parenting is not confined to the publishing world. In very recent years, several UK newspapers have begun to include weekly supplements and inserts aimed specifically at parents and families³. The traditional magazine market is in decline as a result of a changing media landscape and the rise of new platforms such as weblogs; despite this, more parenting magazine titles have been successfully launched, found a niche and appear to be sustaining their hold, including in the UK *Pregnancy and Birth*, *Parenting*, *Mother&Baby*. The US market is more ambitious, including *Working Mother*, *Gifted Child*, *Parents*, *Parenting*, *Family Fun* and *Fit Pregnancy* amongst others. One of the biggest online successes of recent years has been Mumsnet.org, an online discussion portal which receives up to 20,000 'hits' a day.

What does the intensity and saturation with which parenting advice has colonised public space tell us about the possibilities of being a parent today? Does the ubiquity of this advice point to the liberation of mothers from assumptions that they always/already 'know' about

³ For example, *The Times* reserves a four-page spread of the Tuesday edition supplement for its 'Family' section, and *The Guardian* includes an eight-page supplement, 'Family' in its Saturday edition.

parenting? Does the use in contemporary advice of the term 'parenting' undo the gendered relations of mothering? In the seventies and eighties, at the height of the women's liberation movement and of second-wave feminism, many feminist writers powerfully articulated the anxieties, doubts and frustrations they experienced in their mothering, and challenged the idea that the ability to mother is natural, unproblematic, or automatic (Rich, 1977; Dally, 1982). These advice lineages certainly resonate in some places with feminist work, research and activism that sought to highlight maternal dissatisfaction, labour and difficulties. In this chapter, I excavate the shifting meanings behind these advice lineages, and explore how they both reflect and transform feminism's relationship to the maternal. In the historical and archival literature on parenting advice, there has been a tendency to cast the development and shifts of advice in terms of a feminist celebration, as demonstrative of a shift in power from physician to mother, an extension of 'parent power' and the parent-consumer, and of a rise in polyvocality and relativism around advice. I complexify this celebration, and explore in more detail some of the claims made by contemporary experts of their relativism, suggesting that by reading advice genealogically, we can highlight how parenting advice texts are not simply produced *in response to* parental demand for advice, but are also *producing the terms in which* parents are demanding advice.

The first body of literature I turn to emerged out of second-wave feminism and from thinkers who were involved in the Women's Liberation movement in the United Kingdom and the United States. These writers were concerned with challenging the attainability, and even desirability, of the idealized mother who stood at the centre of mothercraft manuals

since the eighteenth century. They saw childrearing manuals as part of wider patriarchal culture which did not value real mothers, but instead valorized the mythical maternal figure of mothercraft that mothers were compelled to strive to become. This body of literature is significant because it represented a sustained intellectual challenge to the discursive claims to scientific knowledge by parenting experts around baby and childcare. Although this 'science of baby care' was contested, struggled over and hotly refuted by different experts within it, the challenge wrought by second-wave feminism was novel. Situating themselves outside of expertise entirely, and rejecting the value of expert knowledges, these feminist writers politicized the issue of childrearing knowledge and called on mothers to think about what they had *lost*, not gained, through the rise of 'scientific motherhood'.

Anger at the experts

In this early scholarship surrounding the rise of the parenting advice and expertise industry, feminist scholars produced passionate and often damning criticism of what they saw as a male-dominated field of medical and clinical authority. The experience of mothering and the practices of childrearing had always perhaps required feminists to ask the most thorny and complex questions, which had no easy answers. Should feminists insist upon freeing women from the constraints of motherhood, or should they work to enable women to mother in other ways, to celebrate 'the gift that only a mother can give'? Feminists have theorised mothering to be, variously, a cause of oppression, a source of female identity, a

way of uniting women in shared experiences, a way of dividing women and creating misunderstanding, hostility and oppression, a form of political activism that can alienate women who are not mothers, don't like being mothers or don't want to be identified primarily as mothers, and as a process in which some women become mothers at the price of oppressing other mothers (DiQuinzio, 1999). DiQuinzio suggests that the politics of mothering has always been 'paradoxical', since it replicates the dilemma of individualism versus difference. Are mothers entitled to equality on the basis of their identities, or should mothers resist and challenge individualism on the basis of the differences between and within subjects? DiQuinzio examines the replication of this dilemma throughout the development of feminist thought. Activists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Ellen Key sought to liberate women from their biology and their reproductive function. Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) saw motherhood as a vulnerabilising status which was part of the apparatus that could only ever grant women a partial, divided and fragmentary subjectivity. Some second-wave feminists saw mothering as an integral obstacle to autonomous selfhood, as Betty Friedan argued in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in which she examined the accounts of a wordless unhappiness – 'the problem with no name' - told by many American suburban housewives.

Still others saw enormous potential in mothering and in women's identities as mothers for collective politics, action and movements for change. Mothering could be a valuable realm where women can express care, creativity and compassion, even forming the basis of (communitarian) feminism itself (Elshtain, 1981). Molly Ladd-Taylor (1994) has argued

that 'mother-work' (the unpaid labour of reproduction and care-giving) were instrumental and formative experiences for women who became maternal activists, and that it was mother-work that motivated women to begin to organise at a grassroots level. In her history of social welfare, education and public health programs in the years 1890 until 1930, Ladd-Taylor (1994) argues that the significant progress made in these fields was a direct result of mothers becoming active in social welfare politics and making such collective demands.

The cultural feminism of the 1970s and 1980s endeavoured to celebrate women's difference, and to reclaim the creative and productive possibilities of mothering through practices such as co-mothering and communal living (Segal, 1997). In her now-classic exploration of motherhood *Of Woman Born* (1977), Adrienne Rich firmly locates the difficulties and anxieties experienced by mothers within the matrices of power that are produced by patriarchy. In Rich's account, pre-patriarchal society revered mothers and their transformative powers and the symbolic alignment of gestation with the cyclical symmetry of the earth were considered to have the power to transform – namely to transform blood into life and milk – and were understood to be powerfully aligned with the cyclical symmetry and processual balance of the earth, rotation of the stars, gestation, birth and death of crops and animals. Since death, as well as birth, was understood to be part of these parallel 'movements in time', mothers in pre-patriarchy were guaranteed symbolic access to anger, violence and destruction, and to the dark side of transformative power, struggle and aggression. Rich argues that modern motherhood has emerged as a result of

the seizure of this transformative power. Drawing on Engels' theorising of the nuclear family as domestication through economic need, Rich argues that men fear the power of motherhood and have claimed it for themselves in order to dispel the threat and recast it as polluting and sinister. Mothers are divided into house units, the domestic sphere institutionally separated from the public and motherhood becomes 'powerless responsibility'. Leaving aside the somewhat rosy idealization of pre-patriarchal life, Rich's work ossified a valuable division between the *institution* of motherhood and its *experience*, which Rich believed could be celebratory if freed of institutional pressures. The problem for women is not motherhood *per se*, but the modern doctrine of the denial of particular emotions that threatened the institution, namely a doctrine of continuous and unconditional mother-love and a denial of anger. This doctrine is repeated throughout the mothercraft manuals, along with exhortations to embrace the 'natural' instinct for mothering through femininity. Rich usefully plotted the historical contingency of supposedly 'natural' aspects of motherhood. This contingency denaturalises maternal identity as neither automatic, natural nor given, but rather, as a difficult process that is always/already marked by the potential for failure. Nor is motherhood a private enterprise, but always, endlessly and exhaustively public, involving the medical establishment, legal institutions and the state. The mantra 'the personal is the political' became a fundamental rallying cry for feminist thought. And for women who fail to live up to this romanticised vision of the self-sacrificing, boundlessly loving woman, the diagnosis offered by parenting experts is relentlessly individualised.

Reading of the 'bad' mothers desperate response to an invisible assault on her being, 'good' mothers resolve to become better, more patient and long-suffering, to cling more tightly to what passes for sanity. The scapegoat is different from the martyr; she cannot teach resistance or revolt. She represents a terrible temptation: to suffer uniquely, to assume that I, the individual woman, am the 'problem' (1977:277)

Rich's insights around the 'terrible temptation' continue to resonate within today's parenting advice in ways that I excavate more fully later in this chapter. In many ways, Rich's work is blind to the racial and classed axes of difference between mothers (Collins, 1994; Reynolds, 2006), yet the above quote is testament to her sensitivity towards the part that discourses of 'good' and 'bad' mothering play in opening up divisions *between* women. Rich's sensitivity around differences and divisions between women is more absent than present in wider cultural feminism; a kind of feminism that is keen to celebrate 'womanhood' even at the risk of essentialising women.

In a similar vein, Ann Dally (1982) interrogated the presumed link between ideals of motherhood – the vision of the self-sacrificing martyr – and the experience of mothering by 'real mothers'. She points to the dangers of an idealisation of the mythical and mystical importance of mother-love within the work of psychoanalysts such as John Bowlby.

Bowlby claimed that maternal deprivation of any kind has profound effects on the ability of children to form relationships and become autonomous adults. He insisted upon exclusive and unbroken maternal care, arguing that anything less damaged children irreparably, and

sidelined the importance of the father, claiming that caring had real benefits for women.

Dally argues that these parenting models have produced a narrow vision of motherhood which presumes and relies upon a heterosexual, legitimate, monogamous, financially secure family. Moreover, she argues that the pressure upon women to prove their femininity and raise a child according to this narrow vision has had dire personal and psychological consequences: in short, that this narrow vision of mothering *damages* both mothers and children.

Unbroken and exclusive maternal care has produced the most neurotic, disjointed, alienated and drug-addicted generation ever known. (1982: 10)

These accounts of mothering re-interpreted the cause of maternal unhappiness and argued that it was caused, not by individual pathology or inadequacy, but through patriarchal social structures that isolated women into nuclear units. Despite the challenges aimed at Bowlby's 'attachment theory', it remains highly influential and is used to buttress aspects of contemporary family policy (see Gavin Miller, 2009).

In a similar vein, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English (1978) saw the advice industry, including figures such as ministers, experts, doctors, psychiatrists and clinicians, as a force that removed power from women and pathologised the complexities of their everyday lives, particularly those of childrearing. They argued in their seminal book *For Her Own Good* that the rise of these industries amounted to a misogynist disenfranchising of women from their

own reproduction and childrearing capacities. Ehrenreich's earlier work explored the specific disenfranchising of female lay practitioners and professionals, including witches, healers and midwives (Ehrenreich, 1973) and this theme of pathological individualization continued in her later collaborative work with English. In this later work, Ehrenreich and English dismissed what they saw as hyper-individualised advice, arguing that 'there is no justification for mutual help or social change in an ideology which holds each person wholly responsible for her own condition, from the welfare mother to the million-dollar-a-year TV star. They each "chose" to be what they are, and they could choose to be something else.' (1978: 319)

This gendering of the advice industry is problematic; although many of the early 'mothercraft' treatises were indeed written by men, often from a philosophical position rather than a practical one and sometimes by men who themselves had no immediate experience of baby and childcare at all, it is inadequate to conclude that parenting advice was consequently male-dominated. As the British historian Christine Hardyment (1995) argues, this conclusion misses one of the most consistently vociferous groups who contributed to mothercraft; mothers themselves. The nineteenth-century shift from baby-care as a tributary of medical concerns about mortality, to being a field of inquiry in its own right, coincided with the growing public authority of a new category of author, mothers, who were being taken seriously as writers, and who through their motherhood were able to give their work an immediacy and a sense of personal purpose and experience.

Taking the contribution of women writers to mothercraft seriously, we might then reverse the very claims of these second-wave critiques and instead interpret the proliferation of parenting advice set out above as a legacy themselves of feminist calls to make the labour of mothering visible, and to acknowledge the complexities involved within such labour.

Several recent historical accounts of the emergence and institutionalisation of parenting advice attempt to do exactly this, and to situate the intensive growth of childrearing advice positively within the progressive empowerment of mothers, the transfer of authority from clinician to parent and the capacity, within a marketplace of advice, for parents to 'choose' their expertise and their childrearing philosophy with autonomy and independence. I turn now to a second, more recent body of literature; social histories of mothercraft. These social histories take a much longer view of mothercraft, and reverse the direction of power, charting its growth and its intensity within a rubric of demand from the 'bottom up', from mothers themselves who sought scientific knowledge from clinicians and who demanded that mothering become a legitimate object of knowledge.

Celebrating the advised mother; from 'by-the-book' to 'buy-the-book'

Social historians of parenting advice chart different pathways through the different incarnations of 'what's best for baby', but what they mostly agree on is that the development of advice has empowered women in significant ways. The US historian Anne

Hulbert (2003) charts the establishment of 'scientific motherhood', initially prompted by educated pioneer mothers in the early nineteenth century who demanded standardised answers to the riddles of parenting. Hulbert claims that through activities such as attending symposiums, writing letters and organising community meetings for concerned peers, these pioneer mothers were able to use their resources to mobilise scientific interest in the sphere of childrearing.

Hulbert's part-genealogical, part-biographical study of a century of parenting advice tells the story of the 'odd couples' of expertise, in which each generation of childrearing advisers centres on a principle conflict between (at least) two key figures and their associates, all of whom she places rhetorically on a 'hard' and 'soft' expert scale. She sketches out the 'hard' camp of experts as a school based upon discipline and obedience. The 'hard' experts feared that mothers who are too affectionate with their children raise ineffectual citizens, who have little sense of autonomy, inner discipline and moral boundaries, and are therefore ill-equipped for the demands of modernity. This 'hard' camp of experts emphasise the importance of discipline, obedience and parental authority, based upon a Lockean philosophy of nurture in the formation of character and recommending parent-centred methods. On the other side of Hulbert's expert scale are those from the 'soft' camp, who take a more Rousseau philosophical stance, emphasising the innate capacities and the underlying nature of the child. The 'soft' experts were also, Hulbert argues, concerned with the ways in which parenting methods *today* might impact upon the capacities of the child to participate within modern citizenship *tomorrow*. The 'soft' experts relied upon a

notion of citizenship as creative individuality, and as such they insisted upon child-centred parenting and letting growth happen. Hulbert argues that expertise is elastic, contradictory, and therefore always political. The commonsense assumptions we might hold about the political strategies mobilized by each generation of the 'hard and soft' camps are continually confounded. 'Hard' positions do not necessarily correlate with the political Right, nor is 'soft' always the natural ally of the Left. The 'hard' advisors have often been mobilised in the name of independence for working mothers – confounding the ideology of the traditionalist Right – by promoting parent-centred ideas about childrearing, whilst the liberal soft advisors require a child-centred intensiveness which relies absolutely on stay-at-home mothers.

As Hulbert convincingly argues, although the loyalties towards the 'hard' and 'soft' camp were over-emphasised and dramatised publicly, each of the major experts privately expressed reservations and ambivalences about their public position, in addition to their theoretical inconsistencies. The hard and soft camps of parenting expertise continue to be re-animated in the contemporary parenting climate too; the complexity of childrearing sidestepped and flattened through reference to 'odd couple' experts of discipline and love⁴.

⁴ One example of the continuing tenacity of the expert 'odd couple' can be seen in a weekend supplement piece comparing the approaches of two London youth centres and their charismatic founders; Kids Company, led by psychotherapist Camilla Batmanghelidjh and practising infinite tolerance, and Eastside Academy, led by former prison governor Ray Lewis and practising zero tolerance (Aitkenhead, 2009). The article glibly reproduces gendered presumptions about the philosophy of each youth centre (Kids Company coordinated by the sacrificing mother, Eastside by the disciplinary father) without grappling with the ways that both have been mobilised for political panache around youth and urban crime.

Hulbert claims that the commercialization of parenting advice and the extension of the industry into a range of media formats has resulted in the erosion of the somewhat paternalist authority of the expertise pioneers. This erosion, for Hulbert, has led to a gradual shift in negotiable power over the last century, from the expert to the consumer, which she terms as a shift from 'by-the-book' to 'buy-the-book'. In Hulbert's analysis, parents who watch *Supernanny* on television, buy the spin-off books or consult the website encounter within a plethora of texts that they may have chosen, been guided towards or perhaps coaxed into by enthusiastic friends and well-meaning relatives; this plethora is empowering in the sense that parents can 'shop around', but crucially for Hulbert it is also foundational in explaining the uncertainty with which mothering is approached and experienced. In spite of (or perhaps more accurately *because of*) this plethora, recognition of the contradictory models necessitate constant reassurances within advice models themselves, as Hulbert indicates with the following expertise excerpts;

Trust yourself -- you know more than you think you do.

(Dr Benjamin Spock, tagline on advice books)

Use it to guide, not to dictate. To augment your instincts, not supplant them. To build your confidence, not tear it down. To empower you, not paralyze you.

(Heidi Murkoff, *Newsweek* 2000)

Other historians of parenting advice have also suggested that the growth of the advice industry has come about because of the demand for scientific knowledge about the right way to raise children. In *Perfect Motherhood*, Rima Apple (2006) explores the lives and writings of the first producers of childcare manuals, magazines and pamphlets, and charts the evolution of what she too calls 'scientific motherhood', an evolution which she argues was conceived of as the unsteady marriage of 'science and love' and which resulted in a gradual shift in the foundation of motherhood from a natural and instinctual ability to care for children, to a skill requiring labour, study and an increasing reliance on medicalised expertise. Apple outlines her intentions early in her book, stating that she does not aim to tell a story of women's oppression through the medicalisation of motherhood; nor a story of the triumph of maternal love, nor of continual, steady, medical progress. She is, she states, telling a story of 'women's search for the best childcare practices...coping with the trials and tribulations of the daily grind of childrearing', which 'documents the ways in which women accepted, rejected and reshaped medical and scientific pronouncements in order to ensure the health and wellbeing of their children' (2006:3).

Apple traces the changing content of advice across different eras; from controlling the environment, cleanliness and nutrition, to protection from infectious diseases, through advances in nutrition, to emotional and psychological health, to scales and tables of developmental 'normality'. Although the incarnations of concern and anxiety have shifted considerably, as has the 'ideal' mother at the centre of them all, Apple argues that the principles behind advice have remained static; that mothers need medical and scientific help

to raise their children. This, she argues, is tied up with modernity – technological changes, declining family size, later marriage, and less experience with younger siblings mean that womens' lives resembled less and less those of their mothers and grandmothers, and it is these changes that require them to look beyond female relatives for advice and knowledge about childrearing.

Like Hulbert's 'elite mothers' who demanded that knowledges around scientific motherhood be made available, Apple's history of nineteenth-century expertise invokes a particular kind of mother; 'active women, typically middle-class women, women with agency, searching for the best means of raising their families' (2006: 8). These women initiated an expertise literature, which in the early twentieth century shifted in tone and presumed a passive mother who would take direction from a physician, rather than evaluating knowledge herself. For Apple, the proliferation of childcare advice and the extension of this advice into new formats, particularly digital realms such as the internet, has 'swung the pendulum back' from physicians and doctors to mothers, who are increasingly empowered to negotiate through different ideas about childrearing. She argues that the successful birth and growth grassroots mother groups such as the La Leche League are important examples and markers of the ways in which the dyad of 'subservient mother and authoritative physician' has become challenged, and in her analysis overturned, in the latter half of the mid-twentieth century. The relationship between mother and physician/expert has, she argues, moved much more towards respectful cooperation.

Julia Grant (1998) makes a similar argument in *Raising Baby by the Book*, examining the ways in which advice was received and transformed by users, consumers and activists and by mothers themselves. Grant's historical account also examines the ways in which 'expertise' does not just come from experts; rather ideas about childrearing exist in complex webs of knowledge and authority. Grandmothers and other (mostly but not exclusively) female relatives continue to influence maternal choices about children, though their wisdom becomes enmeshed within other discourses that purport to be scientific or otherwise objective. The role of other women too becomes central in disrupting earlier top-down accounts – friends, colleagues and casual acquaintances serve a role in shaping these decisions.

These historical accounts admirably seek to place maternal agency back into the history of childrearing advice. Hulbert, Grant and Apple all refuse to see mothers as passive, disempowered receptacles for childcare advice pushed upon them by medical experts, clinicians and psychologists. Instead, the mothers in these accounts become reconfigured as managers of a range of potential childrearing principles, which they can adopt or refuse. In some ways, these socially historical approaches are useful in rethinking and complicating how power works, moving away from second-wave feminist 'top-down' account of expertise dissemination as rather crude patriarchal coercion, and bestowing a sense of the complexities of the power that mothers do exercise in their childrearing choices.

But in other ways, the reversal of power in these accounts continue to simplify the differential relationships between mothers, their experts and the wider context in which expertise is produced, received and negotiated. Hulbert's celebration of parents' capacity to 'shop around' and become empowered through their choices to 'buy the book', rather than simply going 'by the book' reifies empowerment as a celebration of consumption, and does little to examine the complex power and knowledge relations that shape subjectivity.

Neither of these bodies of literature is adequate in formulating the subtle networks of power that circulate throughout contemporary parenting advice. The second-wave critiques of mothercraft rejected advice on the basis of its patriarchal oppression of women, without accounting for the significant ways in which mothers themselves demanded that science attend to childrearing practices, and even contributed to this science. These critiques were also largely blind to the differences between mothers, some of whom were better positioned to act powerfully in relation to advice, whether to adopt it, transform it, refuse or resist it, within wider processes of creating value for themselves as mothers. Although the recent social histories of parenting advice have sought to invert the 'top-down' orientation of earlier scholarship, and to look at the ways in which (some) mothers *demanded* expertise, and were not simply passive vessels upon which expertise was imposed by clinicians, they too are problematic. In situating the growth of advice positively within a story of progressive empowerment for mothers, the transfer of authority from clinician to parent, and the growing capacity for parents to autonomously 'choose' their expertise from a marketplace of advice, these social histories lack a critical depth and do not engage with

how the processes of commodification and commercialization have transformed the intensity with which contemporary advice operates. We need an approach that can orient us critically towards how 'buying the book' is a problematic freedom.

I turn now to a third body of work from critical feminist theorists. These theorists share the concern with excavating the part that culture plays in the production of subjectivity, and they share a critical orientation to the capillary effects of power. In their analyses of culture, power cannot be understood as straightforwardly repressive nor coercive, nor as possessed by a particular group of people; but rather as something that is exercised, as a productive set of techniques through which the modern subject is called into being. Where second-wave feminists would argue that advice power was wielded by men of science in a structure of patriarchal repression, and social historians would counter by arguing that mothers themselves possessed advice power through demanding it of science, these critical feminist theorists have argued that it is through the techniques of the self – the labour of self-making, introspection, reflexive self-surveillance and the consumption of cultural products – that the modern subject is produced. Drawing on poststructuralist notions of the self (Foucault, 1977; Rose, 1989), these theorists argue that there is no such thing as the authentic, natural mother who seeks advice entirely unaffected by power relations, but neither is she coerced into being by patriarchal forces. Rather, knowledge about the maternal subject is produced discursively across culture, including (but not limited to) parenting advice, and mothers purchase, consume and incorporate these knowledges and the attending practices as part of the production of themselves as subjects. As I demonstrate

throughout this thesis, the maternal is a key site where these techniques of the self are enacted. Within the contemporary cultural landscape, I argue that to understand the intensity and ubiquity of parenting advice, we need these more complex accounts of the subject, and the more complex accounts of power that attend them.

Parenting advice in postfeminist times

It is almost *de rigueur* for any writer offering parenting advice today to begin with a disclaimer or acknowledgement that too much parenting advice has made parents confused, or has undermined parental confidence, or is bossy and patronising (Murkoff, 2002; Doherty and Coleridge, 2008; Skenazy, 2009). It is also *de rigueur* for these same advisors to promise that their particular offering of advice will (of course!) be different by virtue of that recognition. Parenting advice manuals and texts have continued to proliferate, and with a momentum which seems to have accelerated across new media technologies. As more experts present their philosophies for judgement and perusal, certainly still through conventional publishing avenues, but also, often, in newspaper columns and magazine supplements, on websites and weblogs⁵, perhaps it is only to be expected that the absolute authority of the expert will be challenged, more readily scrutinised or even rejected. Certainly, as I have noted,

⁵ Transforming cultural landscapes mean that these different platforms of advice do not always remain discrete; some popular weblogs and newspaper columns in particular have gone on to successful second careers as books. One good example of this from the field of parenting is Lenore Skenazy's *Free Range Kids* (2009) which emerged from a newspaper column Skenazy wrote in 2007 in the *New York Sun*, causing 'national' outrage in the mediasphere; Skenazy successfully mobilized this publicity frenzy and created a website, through which she produced her book.

scepticism around parenting expertise is not novel, and the precise authority with which experts speak has often been a basis upon which to challenge them since the earliest mothercraft manuals; some kinds of knowledge ('objective', clinical, produced through 'science') have always counted for more.



Figure 1: From by-the-book to 'buy-the-book'. Shelves of parenting books at my local bookshop

What is perhaps novel is the widespread acclaim of the judgement and authority of the parents at the centre of parenting advice; follow whichever model suits you best, trust your judgement, this is your child and it is your call which parenting orthodoxy you prescribe to. It is no coincidence that the parenting manual that has outsold all others, and which has gone through edition after edition, is Dr Spock's *Baby and Child Care* – the first to situate the mobile, consuming, empowered and informed parental unit at the centre of advice, and the first to disseminate the message that parents know best. Parenting clinician Dr Tanya Byron

– whose television programmes and reputation I explore in more detail in Chapter 7 – published her book *Your Child, Your Way* (2008) as an (entirely un-ironic) antidote to what she saw as an excess of parenting books. I have already noted how the entrenchment of wariness, the centralizing of the parent-consumer and the invitation to be skeptical is interpreted by social historians as a shift in the pendulum of power, from clinician to parent. And yet the popularising of skepticism itself within the parenting industry needs to be dismantled more carefully.

I argue that parenting advice that begins with the assertion that there is ‘too much advice’ cannot be understood as a simple irony, but rather as a demonstration that parenting advice has moved into postfeminist territory. Both the inversion of parenting advice history and the continuous acknowledgement within parenting advice now that ‘real’ mothering is hard and that ‘real’ children do not come with instructions are indications of how firmly the contemporary mothering landscape has become a firm pillar of postfeminism. The term ‘postfeminism’ is used in many ways; in some contexts it has been used to indicate a backlash against the principles of feminism, in which feminism itself is blamed for the problems now facing women (Faludi, 1993), a practice of reclaiming misogynist words (Wurtzel, 1999) or a strategy to progress feminism beyond gynocentrism, whiteness or middle-classness (Modleski, 1991; Hoff-Sommers, 1994). In popular discourse, postfeminism assumes that the goals of feminism have been reached, that feminists are out of date and that feminism has nothing useful to say. This is reflected in theory that presumes women have been nothing but unproblematically empowered by reflexive

modernisation (Giddens, 1991) as we can see in the accounts of parenting advice that see choice itself as a guarantee of freedom.

Other theorists have been more cautious in the unravelling of postfeminist notions of 'choice'. Ros Gill (2007) suggests that postfeminism is best theorised as a distinct cultural sensibility, which invites a particular relationship to oneself; one of self-surveillance, monitoring and regulating oneself and one's life practices; of a constant willingness to enter into the makeover paradigm of transformation and improvement and to seek out and evaluate advice pertaining to this improvement; of individualism, of old structures and constraints fading away (or at least imagined to fade away) to be replaced with the mantra and the requirement to 'invent yourself'. It is important to note what all parenting advice shares in this post-Fordist, parent-knows-best landscape is the assumption that, whatever book you choose, you certainly need one; that much, at least, is expected. Angela McRobbie has posited that postfeminist language invites women to subject themselves to ever more insidious forms of normalizing power; to 'choose to be subjected'. In this climate, visions of meritocratic success require what Angela McRobbie calls 'a forceful non-identity' (2004: 257) or dis-identification with feminism; in which feminist politics is erased and replaced with female individualization; or more specifically 'an anti-feminist endorsement of female individualization' (ibid) in which ambition replaces collective politics, or the grammar of psychological improvement has replaced the language of injustice and oppression (Walkerdine, 2003).

McRobbie points to cultural forms such as the television makeover programme which generates and legitimate new forms of antagonism and judgement and in which the most critical judges of women are no longer men, but other women. Referring to these antagonisms as 'postfeminist symbolic violence', McRobbie offers a powerful critique of the discourse of empowerment through choice. In short, you can choose whichever parenting guru, orthodoxy or philosophy you like – that is your freedom and your agency – but you *must* choose one; and in making that choice you must also commit to the ideals within it, reconfigure yourself within the version of motherhood you have chosen to follow, and strive to embody and perform your maternal subjectivity through specific practices, products, routines and ways of being. Any dissatisfactions or unhappiness becomes the result of your inadequate embrace of the philosophy, your failure to assess and evaluate the parenting orthodoxy you have selected and its appropriateness for you, or your failure to master the techniques contained within it. Structural causes of maternal unhappiness or anxiety are imagined to have receded within this cultural moment of an excess of choice; there is always an answer. Moreover, McRobbie argues that the commitments made by women about the philosophy or ethos with which they live their lives creates and solidifies chasms between them. In this postfeminist climate of choice, mothers divide themselves into ideologically opposed groups of breastfeeders, bottlefeeders, co-sleepers, attachment parents, tough love disciplinarians and free rangers. I explore many of these figures in subsequent chapters.

One public debate which resurfaces continuously and which illustrates the postfeminist divisions opened up discursively between women is the media-hyped 'mummy wars'. This 'debate', if we can call it that, does little to explore the everyday material challenges that face women who must negotiate between employment and domestic care. Rather, it pits working mothers against stay-at-home mothers and generates antagonisms which fail to offer any feminist critique beyond these imaginary binaries, but continue the demonisation of women on both sides of the fence (Peskowitz, 2005; Parkins, 2009). The postfeminist provocation is that whichever choice mothers make, they can be empowered by it and produce themselves in relation to it. For working mothers, there is *Working Mother* magazine and for full-time mothers, there is fulltimemothers.com; what is lacking is a sustained engagement with the *absence* of choice which characterizes many women's decisions around returning or not to work after having children. In the emphasis upon framing decisions as free choices, structural, gendered and economic inequalities which limit and inhibit choice have discursively receded. Far from being empowered by ever-conflicting bodies of childrearing advice, from their entry in record numbers into the labour market, or by the postfeminist invitations to 'invent themselves', mothers are damned if they do and damned if they don't. Imogen Tyler (2009) notes;

Young working-class mothers are still routinely demonised in political discourse and are stable television comic fodder, working mothers are routinely castigated for failing their children, mothers who don't work outside the home are rebuked for failing themselves, their families and the economy. (2009: 1)

As Tyler points out, the maternal has never been so hyper-visible, and yet so incoherent. She points to recent research, conducted by the UK Equalities Review (2007), demonstrating that it is now motherhood – not gender – that leads to women's continuing discrimination in the workforce. And yet it is not feminist anger about these injustices that take the centre stage of culture, but rather notions of good and bad mothering, and conversations about how to situate oneself within the former and avoid the latter, that continue to dominate popular cultural and representational fields.

As I have explored, recent social histories of parenting advice have rehearsed a version of the newly empowered parents, choosing and consuming advice. I argue that this constitutes a postfeminist orientation towards choice, empowerment and consumer freedom in ways that do not fully recognize the complexity of those discourses. Importantly, the account of parenting advice that is produced within this literature – of the empowered parent-consumer and the challenged authority of the physician – has itself been incorporated into much contemporary advice, rendering its web of discursive power ever more insidious. In the final part of this chapter, I turn to two specific examples of this contemporary advice in order to illustrate the troubling, but seductive, postfeminist language of empowerment that are woven within parenting culture.

Seven Secrets to Bringing Up Baby

The first of my examples of the postfeminist turn within parenting advice is Georgia Coleridge and Karen Doherty's parenting book, *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* (2008)⁶. The authors state that the book emerged from their dissatisfactions with reading too many 'bossy, patronising' parenting books. That both are mothers, that they have eight children between them, and that they have raised their children whilst having successful careers, is repeated across reviews of the book, and by the two authors themselves. This contribution, then, is validated not through clinical or medical knowledge, but through the immediate and authentic experiences of the authors as mothers. Moreover, these mothers have produced their contribution with the parenting advice industry firmly at the front of their (reflexive) minds; this parenting book will be different. One reviewer firmly states that this contribution is not the usual childrearing manual fayre (albeit in the same language that accompanies the usual fayre):

The book is different from the usual self-help bibles. For one, it divides parents into seven categories, each representing a different approach to child-rearing [...] Don't imagine for a moment that these are two bossy experts, casting words of wisdom like pearls before the rest of us [...] Finally it all became clear – there is no one right answer – no one right way to parent. Some parents are great organisers, others are more hands off and laid-back.

⁶ Seven appears to be something of a charmed number within parenting expertise. See Cress, Lonning and Berlowe (2000) who suggest that peaceful parents have seven habits and that parents themselves can be best understood as one of four types; the potter, the gardener, the maestro and the consultant. The American talk show host Dr Phil McGraw, meanwhile, offers seven tools for successful parenting. (see <http://www.drphil.com/articles/article/165>)

Some are sensitive and good with feelings, some are enthusiastic and praise their child's efforts, others have a natural authority.⁷

Having 'discovered' seven parenting types, congratulated each type on its strengths and made suggestions about what they could learn from the strengths of the other types, Doherty and Coleridge advocate a kind of reflexive and pragmatic relativism to parents; play to your strengths, try to learn from the strengths of others, accept that everybody is naturally different. Contrasting this relativism with the 'usual' parenting advice and its competitive orthodoxies – unhelpful, unworkable, inflexible orthodoxies, sermonising about 'the' right way to parent – they suggest instead a kind of communitarian exchange of ideas. Parents, they promise, will be 'delighted' to recognize their parenting 'type' and reassured in the things they are already doing right. Identifying your personal parenting type, you will no longer feel irritated 'by smug, organised parents', but instead, feel 'inspired' to find out how they do it. .

In a postfeminist register, the *Seven Secrets* book invites its readers to assess and monitor their life practices in order to identify where their 'natural' parenting instinct lies.

Intrigued by what the notion of seven parenting types might promise and offer, and feeling compelled to find out which one I might be, I visited the *Seven Secrets* website, and found the corresponding multiple choice quiz. Under each of the seven parenting 'types', I was invited to answer two or three questions to assess whether I might indeed have a natural

⁷ Catherine Scott (2008) 'What Kind of Parent Are You?' *Yorkshire Post* 7th May

instinct for this kind of parenting. As it turns out, I am 'naturally' *all seven* parenting types. Under every category, I selected every time the answer that warranted a congratulatory box popping up to inform me that 'you are naturally a pause parent...you are naturally a commando parent'. This exercise told me nothing, except that I know the right *answer* to give in each parenting scenario. I tried selecting other answers, answers I already knew were 'wrong' and, sure enough, an information box popped up telling me that I was doing the wrong thing. If you just tried acting like a laidback parent, the box coaxed, or a sorted parent, you would find that your parental life would improve. These self-surveillance techniques are a key part of knowing and policing oneself and embracing flexibility as a modern postfeminist subject (Gill, 2007). Other postfeminist parenting books require similar subjectificatory work through scrutiny, often in the form of reflective diaries (Byron and Baveystock, 2005). Dressed up as relativism, this 'refreshing' self-help book begins with the promise that, whatever my parenting type, I have strengths to be celebrated, but when it actually comes down to it, there are – as always – parenting practices that we can mark good or bad. What Doherty and Coleridge's book amply demonstrates is that the parent I must strive to be has been *multiplied* by a factor of seven.

Meanwhile, the social differences, and inequalities, between women, are permitted to recede and even disappear. Tellingly, Doherty and Coleridge have been described as "the Trinny and Susannah of modern-day parenting"⁸, partly perhaps because their 'play to your strengths' philosophy of seven parenting categories resonates particularly with the ethos

⁸ *Angels and Urchins* magazine, A&U news, Spring 2008

behind the twelve body types⁹ recently espoused by Susannah Constantine and Trinny Woodall. I would argue that the comparison is warranted because the two authors enjoy a similar social standing to the fashionistas; both achingly upper-middle-class, Oxbridge graduates, one married to a financier and the other to the managing director of a magazine publishing house, London homes and country retreats in the Cotswolds and children attending private boarding schools. The privileges and the social capital that has afforded these two women the luxury of producing their own parenting book are absent; by following the self-surveillance and associated labour they set out, there is an implied promise that we too can all enjoy their domestic harmony.

The second example I want to draw on as an illustration of the postfeminist climate in which parenting advice now rests, and which also demonstrates the need to employ critical feminist theory, takes the form of a television programme. This four-part documentary programme, *Bringing Up Baby* was broadcast in 2006 and ostensibly sought to demonstrate the broad variety of parenting orthodoxies across the previous century. It also promised to demonstrate, in an echo of books such as *Seven Secrets*, that there is no one 'right' way to raise babies. I argue that, contrary to the objectives of the programme makers, the vociferously angry response to the programme, by various groups and organisations, demonstrates that there are very clear limits to the 'choice' with which parents can approach the range of parenting philosophies.

⁹ A Foucaultian reading of these classification schemes might relate the twelve body shapes to nineteenth century taxonomies of race, to phrenology and to obsessions about markers of race and ethnicity ('the Jewish nose', the Hottentot Venus and so on).

In the programme, six sets of new parents were coupled with three experts, each promoting a specific approach to the care of newborn babies. Claire Verity acted as the advocate of the work of Frederik Truby King, whose routinised behavioural approach was (mis)labelled as the '1950s method' by the programme¹⁰. This method recommends that babies are bottle-fed at strict intervals, contact is kept to a minimum and they sleep alone from day one. Dreena Hamilton, advocating the work of Dr Spock and his emphasis on responsive parental judgement, was the guru given the moniker of 'the 1960s method'. Finally, Claire Scott was enlisted as the expert for the '1970s method' which was presented as the 'continuum concept', an approach which emphasises the importance of continual contact with newborns, through the use of slings and 'co-sleeping' (in which babies and parents all share a bed), as well as breast-feeding on demand. Parents were assigned their experts according to their pre-expressed preference, and over the course of the four episodes their progress, difficulties and triumphs with the methods were displayed, as well as their developing relationship with their advisor. In the final episode, the parents were invited to reflect upon their experience with the method according to a range of parenting 'success' markers; how was their sex life, how was their social life, how was their relationship with their baby?

¹⁰ According to the British historian Christina Hardyment (1995), Truby King's baby care methods were first implemented in New Zealand in 1907, and he enjoyed his greatest years of success in the UK in the 1920s and 1930s.

What is interesting about this programme is not so much the 'objective' judgement of three babycare methods, but the complex and animated antagonisms between the three experts; whilst the six couples were amiable when they finally met one another, the three experts seemed to spend all their time together arguing, nit-picking and making derogatory remarks about one another. Childrearing emerged not so much as a free choice between equally valuable philosophies (although all six sets of parents claimed to be perfectly happy with the choice they had made) but rather as a field for intense and bitter struggle, that invoked difficult feelings for those committed to particular ideologies.

Perhaps more importantly, *Bringing Up Baby* produced a great deal of controversy as a programme once broadcast. Claire Verity in particular was singled out and accused of being a dangerous charlatan and recommending childrearing practices which are emotionally damaging and physically risky to children. She was lampooned as a proponent of 'child abuse' by The National Childbirth Trust. The Royal College of Paediatricians and Child Health issued a statement voicing alarm about some of Verity's methods. The Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths issued a public warning to the broadcaster of *Bringing Up Baby*, Channel 4, counselling that Verity's advice went against their own research, which suggested that babies left sleeping in a separate room for the first six months were at increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Another parenting expert and author, Gina Ford, criticised Verity in several online and newspaper articles and wrote to the NSPCC, demanding that they take action against the production company responsible. The NSPCC meanwhile described Verity's methods as 'outdated and

potentially harmful'. The status of Verity's qualifications, as well as her own childlessness, was cited repeatedly as reasons to doubt her expertise, leading Channel 4 to launch an investigation, though all the while insisting that a maternity nurse needs no qualifications to practice (Shaikh, 2007). Verity was due to speak at The Baby Show in Earl's Court in 2007, but in the ensuing public debate and in response to complaints made to OFCOM and threats from mothers' groups to protest throughout her arrival and the show, her invitation was retracted by the organisers. The executive producer of the series, Daisy Goodwin, has reported that one of the couples who had followed Verity's regime in the programme had been harassed after the broadcast; including being verbally abused in the street and spat at in a supermarket¹¹.

These affective and charged encounters illustrate the divisions that are opened up by different parenting practices. As seductive as the promises of postfeminist culture might be, the empowered choice package that it offers assumes that each of those choices is equally valued; the treatment of Verity suggests that this is not the case and that there are complex hierarchies of worth that parents must navigate through.

Most significantly, the passionate response that was invoked by *Bringing Up Baby* demonstrates that it is crucial to engage with televisual parenting culture and texts, and signals the significance of television in not just representing *but also* constituting and producing dense knots of meanings around good and bad parenting. The self-surveillance

¹¹ Goodwin commented on these events at 'Parenting Advice and the Media', a roundtable discussion held in November 2007 at Cambridge University

and monitoring of oneself and one's life practices that the postfeminist cultural sensibility requires of its subjects has a particular salience with regards to the extension of parenting advice onto the television platform. Considering the intense proliferation of parenting advice and knowledges, the British historian Christina Hardyment captures the impact of self-surveillance upon the experiences of childrearing particularly well:

One is made part of a self-conscious peer group, a live specimen pinned under the microscope of articulate sociologists, watching oneself being a mother.

(Hardyment, 1995: x)

In the next chapter, I examine the particular place that families and the intimate space of the home has had throughout television history, and the significance that this intimate sphere, in its emotionality and the texture of the everyday, has played in the growth of reality television formats. It is reality television which, perhaps more than any other first-person media, that resonates most immediately this sense of 'watching oneself' being a subject, a woman, a mother, that Hardyment touches upon here. I bring the discussion towards the format of makeover television, which promises to transform the subject through expertise and life training. I examine the particular bearing that this makeover format has upon the extension of parenting advice.

Chapter 2 – Television, trash, transformation

Perhaps it makes no difference anymore whether we are telling our story on air or silently contemplating it. We all want to be stars¹

(Verena Voigt, 2007)

In September 2008, Channel 4 began running promotional adverts for its eight-part documentary series *The Family*. In the first trailer, broadcast prior to the beginning of the series, a family sprawl together on a sofa watching television and commenting upon what they see on the screen. A man (who we presume is the father) asks gruffly, we're not that bad are we? There is a pause while he contemplates his own question, silence from the rest, and then he answers it himself, remarking, well, I don't know. Subtitles then tell us 'to understand *your* family, you have to watch this one'.

Family life has always been a staple of television, the rhythms of daily life and the recognisable banalities of the intimate sphere serving as re-creations of places and spaces familiar to the audience. Fictional sitcoms and dramas based around suburban family life themselves placed television and television watching at the centre of the worlds they represented (Spigel, 1992). What was the social purpose of television? Raymond Williams (1961) argued that modern urban industrial living is both mobile and self-sufficient, or what he calls 'mobile privatisation', and requires new forms of social contact and input. Television, for Williams, offers modern subjects within the private

¹ Verena Voigt (2007), Press Release – Return of the Real at Ausstellungshalle zeitgenössische Kunst Munster, Germany

space of 'the family project' a form of media that is both defensive and anxious, albeit fictionalised and often idealised. Examining the first broadcast of 'reality television' as we might now understand it, *An American Family* (PBS, United States, 1973), Mark Andrejevic (2004) suggests that it is no coincidence that televisually fictionalised families 'went real' during a period characterised by theorists as newly flexible and post-Fordist.

Reality TV emerged during a period in which the destabilization of mass society was accompanied by the reformulation of the boundaries that helped maintain its social and cultural hierarchy (2004: 66)

The turn to reality television in Andrejevic's reading is part of the transformation of notions of celebrity, authority and hierarchy; 'being real' is *the* central tenet in reality programmes and being real, being authentic and being ordinary produces the authority to speak and to appear. The cultural theorist David Morley (1995) suggests by understanding how we watch television, anthropologists can come to understand 'an awful lot' about society. The trailer for *The Family* suggests that through watching other families on the screen, we might even come to understand our own families better. What then can the contemporary television climate tell us about society, and about being a subject in society, today? The most significant change within the content of this television climate in the past two decades has almost certainly been the enormous rise, proliferation and success of reality television; television that is unscripted, that involves ordinary people rather than professional actors and that follows, in various ways, the drama of the everyday. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005) suggest that, until the arrival of reality television, 'factual programming had never succeeded as a consistently

top-rated TV genre on British television' (2005:2). Reality television, they argue, has altered the terrain of factual programming; contributing to changes to working practices within the television industry, importing a new televisual grammar, establishing new priorities for producers and new expectations for viewers. The ubiquity of reality formats cannot be underestimated. In 2000, Jon Dovey compared the percentage of airtime devoted to factual programming and found significant increases across the three major broadcasters. More recently, Beverley Skeggs, Helen Wood and Nancy Thumim (2008) examined a 'snapshot' of weekly UK television listings and found 93 separate 'reality' programmes; they note that this snapshot included only 'free-to-air' or terrestrial listings, and the number would have been multiplied had they also included the many non-terrestrial, satellite and cable channels also.

The changes wrought by the rise of reality television are manifold, and in this chapter I explore some of the attempts to research and wrestle with what these changes might mean. I speak as a star of reality TV myself; without any aspirations whatsoever to appear on television, I have already managed to appear in two programmes. Once in the background, I appeared as a (non-talking) talking head while two friends gave their opinions about what constituted 'beauty' for the magazine show *Russell Brand's Big Opinion* (E4, 2006) and once I appeared posing as a member of another friend's family, in a lifestyle programme called *Don't Move, Improve!* (UKTV Style, 2004). What does it mean that appearing on television need not be touched by the aura of celebrity and fame, or even confined to professional media vocations? Do my commonplace experiences with what was once considered a 'special' opportunity suggest a democratising of

televisual content? If we can really all be stars, even for the standard fifteen minutes, can we conclude that the power of television lies in the hands of everyone?

In this chapter I will explore a number of explanations put forward by media critics in an attempt to understand the relentless rise of reality television. These explanations point, variously, to transformations in the political economy of televisual media, the rise of 'post-documentary' documentary and the entangling of discourses of gender, taste and public/private dichotomies. I examine these explanations in light of one specific strand of reality programming which has emerged as particularly salient within UK television – the television makeover – and point to emerging scholarship surrounding class and subjectivity as a way of critically exploring these developments. Drawing on this scholarship, I argue in Chapter 4 that the changes in media and television culture reflect new forms of political and cultural neoliberal subjectivity, and that “the politics of reality television is a cultural politics” (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 3). The technologies of reality television – unscripted, immediate, intimate and concerned with the transformation of the individual rather than of social power and structure – pervade and inform the social and political sphere. I will examine two key theoretical texts, the work of Jon Dovey (2000) and Mark Andrejevic (2005) which I argue are useful for making critical sense of the contemporary reality television landscape. I pay close attention to a 2008 programme *The Family* which I argue illustrates the centrality in this landscape of the ordinary and the everyday aspects of intimate sphere. In my reading of this programme, I suggest that we can put the critical theory to work in excavating both discourses of 'classlessness' which saturate cultural space, even as the texture of social

class remains absolutely fundamental to the symbolic meanings within this space. I return to the tenacity of these discourses of classlessness in reference to *Supernanny* in Chapters 4 and 5, a programme which, like *The Family*, is narrated absolutely in classed terms despite these claims to classlessness.

The rise of 'reality' – economic explanations

The antecedents of contemporary reality television can in fact be found from the earliest years of television. Programmes that placed 'ordinary people' as opposed to professional actors at the centre were broadcast during the first broadcasting decade, usually as hoax shows or gameshows (Dovey, 2000). As I have already stated, the first 'reality' show, as the genre might be understood today, is widely agreed to be *An American Family* which followed the fortunes and problems of a family going through a divorce. Whilst the reality genre is not in itself novel, but has indeed been a minor staple in the diet of television, what is relatively novel is its unprecedented ubiquity. The last fifteen years have witnessed an enormous growth and evolution of the 'reality television' genre, to the point that categorising 'reality' as a specific genre itself becomes incoherent (Corner, 2000). What was, not so long ago, the realm of a handful of talk shows and a scattering of daytime style segments within magazine shows that were clearly demarcated as 'reality' programming has proliferated and evolved into a huge range of hybrid programs that dominate the schedules of most of the major broadcasters and constitute a formidable proportion for the remainder. All but the most

basic of digital television packages now offer – depending on the stringency of your criteria – at least a dozen channels devoted exclusively to reality and/or lifestyle television and the lightweight diversionary logic of reality has extended to a range of hybrids on the mainstream terrestrial channels too.

Some media theorists have explicated this inexorable rise as a consequence of transformations in the political economy of television (Kilborn, 2003). The identities of the mainstream terrestrial channels were imagined to be relatively stable upon their introduction, along with the audience demographic that they were imagined to appeal to – BBC1 (first broadcast in 1936, regular broadcast beginning in 1955) represented the mainstream, ITV broadcast the popular (1955), BBC2 (1962) catered for more highbrow demands, Channel 4 (1982) was introduced as a provider for the alternative minorities, and Channel 5 (2002) considered itself a provider of content for young (male) audiences².

In political economy accounts of television, it is the emergence of cable, satellite and later digital channels that have transformed the televisual climate. More channels resulted in more competition between broadcasters for an audience share – whether that competition was the result of advertisers demands or to justify public resourcing through the television licence fee. As well as the increased choice that a specialist

² Channel launches do not, of course, occur magically within a political vacuum; the optimism that greeted the 'alternative programming' mandate of Channel 4 in the UK has been attributed to the experience of polarity of the period and can be compared with the widespread critical denigration of the launch of Five at a moment in which 'low culture' was attacked with renewed vigour. Five was quickly positioned as the inheritor of trash culture, with its (unofficially) stated territory of, in the words of then-director of programmes Dawn Airey, 'football, films and fucking' (Crisell, 1997).

multiplicity of channels offers, changes in technology – the introduction of video, for example – give audiences an additional opportunity to opt-out, to bypass scheduling and advertising. The Broadcasting Act of 1990 loosened the definition of television as a public service and promoted the importance of consumer choice through a range of deregulatory measures, including opening up UK television and requiring that all broadcasters provide no less than 25% of their channel airtime to content purchased from independent producers. The ‘new order’ of television that deregulation brought about in the 1990s is one characterised by the coexistence of both public and commercial television, resulting in pressures on public television to operate with a commercial logic (Barker, 1997).

This increasing competition has undoubtedly had a profound, though complicated, effect on the kinds of programming that production companies are willing to approach; namely, that which is cheap and quick to produce, and marketable to broadcasters. Fictional television – dramas, soaps, sitcoms – require writing teams, actors, rehearsals and set production, all of which cost money, take time and disperse creative power. Whilst factual programming is usually cheaper to produce, it may struggle to appeal to popular sensibilities. Documentary television, in the conventional sense, may be subversive, intellectually highbrow or niche interest, but it is also risky in a competitive televisual economy – can documentary engage a wide audience?

Reality-based formats are economically favoured in this distribution-led, competitive climate for a number of reasons. Reality television is cheap and quick to produce, and it

lends itself well to hybridity and innovative combinations, contexts and challenges.

Richard Kilborn (2003) argues that this genre 'extracts maximum entertainment potential from factually-based material' (2003: 11) and his definition provides us with some useful features against which we can evaluate the numerous formats. Reality television uses video equipment that is lightweight, portable and requires very little intrusion upon the situation, enabling on-location filming and doing away with the need for production sets and studios; involves surveillance footage, reconstruction and simulation, video diaries and on-the-scene film; is presented as unrehearsed, unscripted and spontaneous; draws almost exclusively on the events and experiences of 'ordinary' people who are not media professionals, sometimes with limited experts or hosts; is edited into a coherent narrative form that is packaged and promoted on the basis of its status as reality.

Even using Kilborn's criteria, the term 'reality television' remains in itself problematic, not least because separating what might constitute 'fact' and 'fiction' is seldom a simple exercise when engaging with media output. Issues of representation, authenticity and credibility have always figured high in the history of factual documentary, and these issues have intensified during 'the reality years' (see Kilborn's discussion of the controversies around *The Connection* for example). The rise of reality television does not of course mark the end of the factual – but it does invite a proliferation of hybridised genres. Optimists suggest that the hybridising tendencies of reality TV are an innovative popularising of documentary that may otherwise remain inaccessible and highbrow. The rise of reality programming in these accounts constitutes a wider pact between

documentary and popular cultures, in an era best termed 'post-documentary' (Corner, 2000).

Other political economy readings are even more cynical; those which put forward a 'dumbing down' thesis, anchor reality television within an increasingly bland, commodified, titillating cultural milieu. Reality television is considered to be undemanding and lightweight, 'diversion rather than enlightenment' (Postman, in Kilborn, 2003; 11); the final nail in the coffin of the original cultural mandate of broadcasting. In these accounts, the great and good tenets of broadcasting public service – to 'educate, inform and entertain' – championed by John Reith at the advent of television as essential to maintaining a healthy public sphere and an informed citizenry, have been systematically undermined through the rise of consumerist diversionary television. In particular, the rise of the reality format is seen as hijacking the 'discourses of sobriety' (Nichols, 1991; 3) that was documentary film's forte. Clay Calvert (2000) argues that the rise of reality television has sounded the death knell of the public sphere and the end of political engagement, stating that discussion has been replaced by watching, and that the flipside of the death of discourse is the birth of voyeurism.

These accounts of the rise of reality television are problematic, not least because they reify the notion of a 'golden age' of the public sphere which has been corrupted and denigrated through succumbing to the market. This neglects important questions of access and participation in the 'golden age' and the democratising (though perhaps not fully realised) potential of reality television with its plethora of ordinary participants.

Assessing this plethora of ordinariness as the debasement or degradation of culture seems elitist at best and misanthropic at worst. Oft-repeated 'factoids' concerning how more British citizens vote in television talent contests than political elections are often held up by academics and journalists alike as evidence of the degradation of public culture through reality television, without attending to how politics itself has become something of a 'culture industry', replete with photo opportunities, stagecraft and flamboyant personalities (Corner and Pels, 2003).

The emotional public sphere

The disparagement of reality formats as formats without value and somewhat beneath serious intellectual consideration also has a significant gendered dimension. Reality television is interpreted as a 'feminisation' of the public sphere; feminisation implying a loss of something – objectivity, seriousness, value, truth-telling – rather than transformation. The 'public sphere', as defined by Jürgen Habermas (1989), privileges rational reflection as an essential ingredient in political literacy and politically enlightened discussion. The rise of emotional realism, confession and melodrama in televisual formats, of therapeutic and often contradictory talk and of excitable and confrontational forms of discourse rather than sober ones, is interpreted as the 'loss' or decline of public rationality and political engagement. These narratives of loss become mediated through other categories of value, including gender and social class. The rise of therapeutic talk in television, for example, has been disparagingly narrated as the

'feminisation' or 'soaping' of more 'rational' formats such as documentary. I discuss this in more depth later in this chapter, but it is worth reflecting upon how these economies of cultural value are gendered. Gaye Tuchman (1975) argued that women are symbolically annihilated in the media through absence, condemnation or trivialisation, a process we can unearth in the widespread dismissal of reality television as feminisation; or rather in the ways in which 'feminisation' becomes grounds for dismissal in itself. The ways in which reality *genres* are *gendered* as feminine takes us to the other history of reality – that of talkshows, considered by some theorists to be the incubator of a new kind of 'emotional' public sphere. Whether this emotional public sphere is considered empowering as a space to 'talk back' to authoritative knowledges (Gamson, 1998) or merely another site for moral indignation, television conservatism is itself a highly contested debate. It is however, important to acknowledge this history; something which political economy readings of reality formats do not always do. Jane Shattuc (1997) situates talkshows within a history of media forms (advice columns, talk radio, 'yellow journalism') that have always privileged discussion, advice, personal relationships and private spaces and she champions them as a positive forum for the examination of women's issues. Although Shattuc does not explore reality television, we can probably assume that her reading would consider this format, like talkshows, to be informed by feminism – the personal is political – and to be roundly dismissed in those terms too. In other words, the project of the personal is considered to be denigrating and damaging the political. I address the politicisation of the intimate sphere in Chapter 4, drawing attention to the salience of parenting cultures within contemporary governmental policy around the family.

The privileging of the real

These discursive televisual shifts – to the personal, the intimate and the authentic – point to another feature that both distinguishes reality TV from older forms of documentary and highlights how the milieu of reality television has transformed documentary; where the latter sought to contextualise citizenship within wider apparatus of power and privilege, the former produces a model of citizenship predicated upon ‘risk avoidance’ through reinvention. Reality television emerged from factual documentary television – television that aims to explore and re-present ‘the real’ through a combination of interviews, live footage, reconstructions and expert testimony – and combines these documentary claims to representative truth with the affectivity of melodrama and the narrative structure of soap to produce a particular kind of ‘realness’. Adopting surveillance strategies of the factual documentary and the confessional emotion of melodrama under a rhetoric of ‘getting real’ produces this particular flavour of realness. Put simply, the documentation of factual documentary plus the drama of melodrama equals the ‘realness’ in reality TV.

This blend of fact and fiction is by no means an innovation of reality TV, but has a long history. The commonality of such blends has prompted suggestions for marking out the definitions and limits of particular blends – ‘faction’, ‘dramadoc’ and ‘story

documentaries' being just three examples. The impossibility of a resolution reminds us that the imagined tidiness of genre is itself a fiction. Some attempts to delineate the relative importance of fact and fiction are made on the basis of the ordering of terms; 'dramatised documentary' for example indicates a quite different configuration from 'documented drama' – or does it? One aspect of the various reconfigurations of genre labelling seems almost universal – that it is the 'fact' half that has become privileged as the marker of value. Some critics have examined the very public scandals surrounding the authenticity of some documentaries in the 1990s, most notably as I have already noted (but not exclusively) Carlton Television's *The Connection* (Winston, 2000; Kilborn, 2003; Dovey, 2000) as a precursor to the suspicion of the real³.

The popularity of this 'realness' does not necessarily indicate the beginning of the end for fictional television, which is still produced, distributed and watched. As I have discussed above, the economic tendency to favour reality genres, particularly as cheap filler in the schedules of new channels, would seem to constitute another stage in the era of the self. Reality television, as we have seen, may cross all manner of formats, from docu-soap to peepshow to talk show to gameshow, but what all these formats have in common is the centrality of ordinary, real people who are seen to have no professional acting skills, opportunity to rehearse or scripts to follow.

³ *The Connection* was ostensibly about a Colombian drug cartel but was later exposed as a largely fictional piece populated by actors and misleading scenes. The resulting press frenzy sparked a public debate about the credibility of documentary. Scholars have suggested that this expose among others have led to a continuing public suspicion of staging, fabrication and hoaxing within the realm of the 'factual' and a resultant valourising of realness.

The substance of these programs is the emotional display of one's authentic self. The impossibility of documentary truth is one of many catalysts that have contributed to the pursuit of 'realness' and correspondingly to media that documents the performance of the self. The magnification upon the emotion of real people has come to replace in many instances the distance and neutrality of factual television. This neutrality of factual television was always, of course, an imagined neutrality, achieved by rendering invisible the agenda of the programme makers. In the context of reality television, the camera is again rendered somehow neutral. In this instance, this is achieved by fetishizing the display of emotion as a moment of unmediated and authentic purity. The popularity of viewing these displays of selfhood points to an increasing preoccupation with 'the authentic self' that is rooted in discourses of psychoanalysis, personal growth and self-knowledge.

Critical approaches to reality television

I want to focus now on the work of two theorists in particular, Mark Andrejevic and Jon Dovey, who have addressed how the marketing of reality television as a journey of the authentic self is at the centre of its profound success. The poststructuralist directions of their work are important to the arguments I develop in the thesis regarding the ways in which reality television texts discursively produce a neoliberal and mobile orientation to the self.

Mark Andrejevic's (1997) neo-Marxist exploration of the reality genre situates participants within a system of emotional 'work' in which the surveillance of their private worlds is yet another form of selling one's labour, albeit with an ironic wink. He suggests that in our achingly savvy, post-Frankfurt School postmodern culture, the manipulative power of the cultural industries is all too evident. Consumers have become suspicious of the script, the rehearsal and the actor, and programming which purports to be fictional is increasingly distrusted as having an unknowable agenda and an invisible influence. The compulsion of reality TV for Andrejevic is that it 'guarantees' authenticity, serving as an escape *into* – not *from* – reality. 'Reality' here serves as a shorthand for 'untainted by media messages', although this is inevitably a problematic shorthand. Production gatekeeping, participant screening and footage editing are rendered invisible in this version of 'reality', in much the same way as they are in more conventional factual documentary.

Andrejevic argues that this invisibility is even harder to critique in reality TV because the artifice of media is always/already foregrounded and the subject of playful irony. Surveillance becomes a process by which participants display their truth; the slippages between truth and essentialism are continually shaky, as Andrejevic subtly indicates;

The incoherent promise of universal access to the apparatus of self-promotion...doubles as an invitation to comprehensive self-disclosure
(1997: 6)

The viewer of reality TV is apparently given unfettered access to a perpetual monitoring and the participants are continually marked as 'ordinary', 'real' and existing beyond the contamination of fictional agendas. In this context, cheap and low-quality filming techniques such as hidden surveillance and shaky camera work not only lower the costs of production in an increasingly competitive world, they also heighten a particular gritty resonance of realness and imbue the programme with an additional credibility.

The compulsion to view this realness has been interpreted, by Andrejevic among others, as a compulsion to 'escape' media influence by accessing unscripted and spontaneous programming. The 'realness' of the participants serves as a theoretical contrast to the glossy world of manufactured 'showbiz', and by opting into reality TV, viewers can imagine that they are bypassing – at least temporarily – the 'fake' world of celebrity⁴. Watching 'ordinary' or 'real' people becomes in this instance a critique of the very distinctions of 'ordinary' and 'celebrity' that govern the aura of media fame in other genres, or, as Andrejevic puts it, 'Walter Benjamin got it right – sort of' (1997:5).

For Andrejevic, the fetishization of emotion as authentic and beyond the contamination of the production crew enables the tautology of the reality spectacle to survive; to use his phrasing, this fetishization 'protects the artifice by exposing it' (1997: 16).

⁴ We can find examples of this rhetoric of 'realness' – what Kilborn calls 'the promotional sleight of hand' – not just within reality TV but across the cultural spectrum. The UK bank Halifax launched several advertisements that featured its own staff singing versions of popular music with rewritten lyrics advertising various banking services. The promotional buzz that these advertisements generated centred on the 'realness' of the singers and their status as actual employees served the whole enterprise with a surprisingly unreflective credibility. Their unprofessional and even kitsch performances – what comedian Rory Bremner has called the 'karaoke effect' of realness – even resulted in a somewhat ironic fan-base developing (principally for the original performer, Howard Brown) which cumulated in several 'celebrity' signings at Halifax branches.

Perpetual surveillance, Andrejevic argues, 'doesn't compel conformity; rather, it reveals authentic individuality' (ibid). According to this argument, one of the pleasures of watching reality TV is that it enables us, the viewers, to observe and evaluate these performances of self in a lightweight and undemanding context; as diversion rather than enlightenment. Reality television may situate the individual within a performative system, but it does not for Andrejevic fulfil its liberatory potential as a critical space for undoing notions of essentialism, since it recoups the adequacy of this performance as a criteria for judging 'realness'. It is not a case of productively refiguring the self as performative, but rather judging performances according to whether we find them adequately 'real'.

Most of the television examples that Andrejevic draws upon in the formulation of his argument are immersive gameshow or challenge formats with a financial incentive (either directly through prize money or indirectly with the promise of impending celebrity). His work is of limited application for the transformative formats that I explore, yet his critical account of the ways in which the discourses of realness and authenticity is useful in terms of exploring how the successes of transformations are evaluated by viewers. In Chapter 7, I reflect upon the issues of savviness and critical mastery that Andrejevic's work raises, and examine the ways in which viewers of *Supernanny* took pleasure in contemplating the truth of what they watched and judged the effects of production processes, editing, soundtrack and staging of particular sequences.

Jon Dovey's (2000) exploration of British reality television in its myriad formats places the fragmentation of the genres within broader overarching cultural shifts in the ways in which the subject is constituted. He argues that first-person media is one of the many mediated spaces in which our identities as authentic selves are produced through confession and disclosure. His Foucauldian exploration of the production of mediated intimacy as the guarantor of selfhood is particularly useful in my analysis of the specific format of makeover television.

Dovey's account of the rise of first-person confessional media also explicitly aligns the process of confessional therapy with neo-liberal discourse that substitutes personal responsibility for collective struggle and points to the emptying of categories such as class. Discussing the 'A&E' reality format that dominated television schedules in the 1990s, Dovey suggests that;

In its insistence upon accident and pathology at the expense of cause and context the reality TV genre produces a chaotic model of society in which emergency service workers are assigned key status in signifying the vestigial role of the state under globalisation. (2000: 79)

The rise of first person media has, Dovey points out, been celebrated by a number of media theorists as the triumph of the individual, a plurality of voices and the parade of the ordinary as worth speaking and worthy of the viewers' attention. I have already noted that a number of feminist responses to the talk show for example – an earlier format for the display of ordinary voices – centred on the renewal of public spaces

through a reversal of the conventions of who gets to speak (Shattuc, 1997). This is, of course, precisely why first person media tends to be critically denigrated; in validating the ordinary, marginalized and 'other', talk shows produce spaces for trashy low culture (Grindstaff, 2002). Similarly, as Dovey points out, although these formats may have emerged from documentary, they are panned because they are engaging and entertaining. Surely, he asks, real documentary cannot be popular? As Dovey notes, the distinctions drawn between serious and popular documentary have a significant *gendered* element, in that popular documentary is invoked as evidence of the feminisation of the public sphere.

The unease demonstrated at the prospect of factual TV that is actually entertaining to watch – as if the proper mission of factual was to cling to a wholly outmoded position of benevolent seriousness. (2000: 96)

The 'realness' of reality TV may be signified in a number of ways, depending upon the narrative demands of the format, but realness is most often signified with performances of emotion. The display of one's inner life is conceived of as evidence of an authentic response to the situation. Correspondingly, attempting to hide, obscure or keep private one's 'true' feelings is interpreted in this context as presenting a sham façade of subjectivity. This framework of reality TV rests upon assumptions of stability; the camera never lies, participants will not be able to keep up the pretence, we can all spot the faker. The constructive effects of editing, selective filming and post-production work is rendered invisible, as is the process of participant screening, preparation and emotion work.

The dismissal of reality television is thus intricately bound up with the lament for what is seen as the loss of documentary, the two forms seen as mutually exclusive rather than interdependent. Some cultural theorists have rightly pointed out that these dismissals and laments come not from 'the public' (given the immense popularity of reality formats) but from documentary makers themselves, anxious about the demise of their historical function; to inform the body politic (Palmer, 2002). The documentary maker Paul Watson, whose programme *The Family* (1974) is often considered the major precursor to the 'docu-soap' genre, has argued consistently for a more subtle appreciation of his work as documentary (Biressi and Nunn, 2005). I discuss this programme and its 2008 remake in the section below. Academics and scholars themselves have often expressed their uncertainties with how to approach popular formats of television culture, replicating in some ways the binaries of low and high culture which have dogged political economy readings of reality television, and cultural studies in general. Jon Dovey (2000) highlights his own theoretical reluctance to use certain theoretical tools to think about programmes that fall within the docu-soap tradition, for fear of collapsing the comforting binaries of high and low, trashy and quality;

Using the set of analytic tools derived from the critical history of documentary to think about docu-soaps feels like using surgical instruments to eat birthday cake (Dovey, 2000: 136)

Similarly, Helen Piper (2004) points out that in much media theory and commentary, reality television is only ever considered a mutation – or aberration – of documentary television; a situation which inspires regret. She argues that theorists including Kilborn and Dovey see the processes of fictionalisation as being driven by entertainment rather than by drama, and in doing so can only theorise fictionalisation as a *loss* of seriousness. Piper suggests that this (perhaps unintentionally) reifies a dichotomy between serious ‘real’ documentary and frivolous fiction. Her answer is to complicate the terms of these not wholly factual, not wholly fictional programmes, and to tentatively suggest the term “improvised drama”. In her discussion of *Wife Swap* she points to two related trends within reality television; first, the dream of domestic banality is increasingly drawn on as a topic for programming, and second that the ‘real’ has become less important as a structuring premise, and a rise in challenges, competitions, and experiments. I take up Piper’s reformulation later in this chapter, but first I want to examine the claims made around one specific programme which was constructed precisely around both the dream of banality *and* a ‘return’ to the serious objectives of documentary.

‘Not reality TV, but real TV’ – promoting *The Family*

The debates set out above around the regretful ‘tabloidization’ (Gripsrud, 2000) of documentary television, the implications of domestic banality and questions around the real resurfaced in both the promotion and dissemination of an eight-part series, *The Family*, broadcast on Channel 4 in the months of September and October 2008. It self-

consciously namedrops a twelve-part BBC series of the same name that was broadcast in 1974. The original series of *The Family* (directed by Paul Watson) is widely seen by media theorists and historians as a pioneer of the contemporary genre of reality television. Both the original 1974 series and the 2008 series use documentary practices to put together a portrait of contemporary UK family life, but the television context in which they have been broadcast are worlds apart. I want to briefly explore some of the ways in which the promotion and dissemination of the 2008 series rehearsed some of the anxieties around realness, notions of quality, and the problems of representation.

The 1974 original series of *The Family* followed the Wilkins family in Reading and was a huge success, attracting a large audience share. The Wilkins' 'transgressive' family antics – extra-marital affairs, mixed-race relationships and a lot of alcohol – caused outrage and offence to morality crusader Mary Whitehouse, who called for it to be banned, lest they be imitated by other families. Many reviewers of the 2008 remake drew comparisons between the 'transgressive' Wilkins family and the stars of the second instalment – the Hughes family – who were defined as 'normal', unremarkable, ordinary, both in relation to the Wilkins and in relation to the standard fare of reality TV 'freaks' (Kendell, 2008).

The 2008 remake of *The Family* followed the Hughes family from Kent for six months, using 21 remote controlled wall-mounted cameras in their home, generating 5000 hours of footage, and using the vacated neighbours' house as a production gallery. The series is presented as a non-intervention, naturalistic set of hour-long documentary films,

and the only people that appear on the screen are the family members themselves.

Although this technical set-up echoes that which is used in another house that has become part of the British television milieu – the *Big Brother* house – it was insisted, repeatedly, that *The Family* is the absolute opposite of the *Big Brother* house (Gibson, 2008). Director Jonathon Smith stated in the promotional backstory on the *Family* website that ‘this is not reality TV, but *real* TV’ (my emphasis) a sentiment echoed by producer Dickson, who adds ‘it is lovingly crafted’. Both are keen to emphasise the documentary, rather than docu-soap, lineage of *The Family*. Smith emphasises the ‘universal truths forming the backbone of each documentary’ and as such posits that the series represents ‘a new kind of intimate and considered filmmaking’. The anxiety about acknowledging how these documentaries cannot help but be legacies of reality television – that we cannot help but situate them within a post-*Big Brother* world⁵ – converts into a determination to speak of them as definitely *not* reality television. The programme was consistently defined instead as ‘real TV’: whatever that might be.

It is assumed that we know the kind of person who is usually compelled to be in ‘that kind’ of reality TV; hungry for fame and willing to flaunt themselves. The history of reality television is caricatured as a history of growing excesses, of outrage and freaks, and the Hughes family are an ‘antidote’ to these characters. The very normality and ordinariness of the Hughes family is a guarantee that what we see is so unaffected by the process of filming as to be almost unmediated. One reviewer suggested it was both the

⁵ *Big Brother* stands as a constant symbol of the fallacies of reality television. In his assessment of the paths and future of reality television, the journalist Stephen Armstrong (2008) claims that ‘like pigs and humans in Big Brother creator George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, it’s impossible to tell the difference’ between entertainment shows, factual formats and reality.

Hughes' 'glorious banality' and the 'entomological' approach to the programme by the producers (observing without interfering) that made the programme so refreshing, so compelling and (importantly) so different from *Big Brother* (Sutcliff, 2008). The portrait of the Hughes family, presented as the antidote or solution to reality television, a return to the high culture values and ethics of a golden age of documentary, its 'non-fiction birthplace' (Armstrong, 2008) was received by a mostly warm press.

Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2005) suggest that by taking up a mantle of high concept 'event-TV', programme makers draw upon discursive history that is more cinematic than televisual and in doing so reproduce dichotomies of value where all reality television becomes lumped together as cheap and quick to produce. Rather than suggesting that reality television does not have to be cheap, reactionary or staged – challenging the terms through which the genre has been devalued – programme makers, including the makers of *The Family*, simply suggest that the programmes they make are not reality television. There is evidence to suggest that audiences have a more complex understanding of these lineages, and that they are more willing to position 'post-documentary' within a history of reality television. In online discussions of the programme, viewers' comments coalesced around a number of themes, including the level of artifice in *The Family* and how 'real' or true to life each documentary is. One commentator indicates his suspicions by referring to members of the family in quotation marks, whilst others point conspiratorially to outfits that mysteriously change between family members leaving the house and returning. 'Realness' is very much up for grabs then, despite the claims of 'real TV' to authenticity and a lack of mediation. In her

research with reality television audiences, Annette Hill (2005) found that viewers evaluated authenticity and performance in terms of the context of the specific programme they were watching. Different formats attracted different degrees of distrust, and audiences sanctioned some editing, staging and performing in the name of entertainment. As online responses to *The Family* suggest, the terms of 'reality' are contested and negotiated with a reflexivity that I suggest can only be defined as 'post-documentary'.

Discourses of classlessness

I argue that the most interesting aspect of the remake of *The Family* was the way in which it unintentionally reflected the remaking of social class within contemporary society. Where the Wilkins of the original series were continually and explicitly located and marked as working-class – and *through* their working-classness to be unrespectable and transgressive – the 2008 remake was coy about issues of social class. The Hughes are not defined as transgressive, by the director or any of the reviewers, but rather as 'normal', unremarkable, ordinary. Roger Bromley (2000, cited in Wood and Skeggs, 2008) notes that 'ordinary' is one of the many euphemisms for 'working-class' to emerge out of discourses of classlessness and political and academic claims that we have witnessed the end of social class. The 'ordinariness' of the Hughes might then signify their working-class ordinariness; however they were read in much more contradictory ways than this. At the same time, however, the Hughes were counterposed with the

shameless self-promotion of the (working-class?) 'freaks' of reality television, and subtly implicated by reviewers within the respectable ranks of the middle-classes.

This problem of where to socially locate the Hughes family cropped up throughout the online discussions. One contributor to *The Family* web forum asks 'can't we have a programme about a normal, middle-class educated family? They might be a bit more interesting. And don't anyone call me a snob', while another states that with the Hughes, 'you have a very upper-middle class family, that most cannot relate to with the size of their house and the amount of money given to the appalling children for nothing'. The Hughes family, intimated by the title of the series to be '*The Family*', representative of the modern British family, ordinary and unremarkable – were both impossible to locate within a hierarchy of social class, and yet interpretable in a variety of ways by viewers. In the context of discourses of classlessness that permeate contemporary society, the Hughes appeared to signify at once everything and nothing in terms of social class⁶.

If we interpret the documentary tradition as a critique of everyday life with a political agenda, then we might want to interpret post-documentary reality television as post-political, as the absence of a political message or of de-politicisation. This, however,

⁶ The whiteness of the Hughes' is both unremarked upon and 'unremarkable', and their whiteness thus becomes invisible. At the time of writing, a new series of *The Family* is being broadcast, again by Channel 4, this time featuring an British Asian family. This is possibly a self-conscious pursuit of greater representativeness in a series about modern family life in Britain. It is important to note that this family's Asian-ness is made visible and frames the action of each episode in a way that the Hughes' whiteness did not. Significantly too, the Hughes' Christianity (both parents were active campaigners for their church) is silenced in the 2008 remake.

misses the politics of the discourse of 'classlessness'. Diane Reay (1998) rightly points out that the discourse of classlessness is *itself* a classed discourse, since it serves classed interests. Similarly, the apparent 'classlessness' of reality television – its refusal to name social class even as it is the texture of classed distinctions that operate to create cultural meaning – does itself have political consequences. This is one of the most significant ways in which the very landscape of reality television, or 'real TV' documentary films, are produced, read, and received; in terms of social difference. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005) consider this facet of reality television to be the most fundamental. The politics of reality television, they argue, is a cultural politics; it is concerned with social difference rather than with the working-class, the politics of identity rather than the politics of collective action, 'parent power or consumer power or girl power [rather] than with electoral power or labour power' (2005: 3). Reality television programmes are for Biressi and Nunn valuable social documents of contemporary class identity and the ways in which it is being re-imagined. Contemporary social class is everywhere in reality television, sometimes subtle and not explicitly referenced as in *The Family* but always in the background; nowhere, though, in the genre is this class identity more prevalent, more immediate and tangibly felt than in the reality genre of makeover or transformation television. It is to this specific genre and the scholarship surrounding it that I turn to next.

Emotions and Ordinarity

Once we start to chart accounts of what the content of reality programming actually is, rather than focusing on the political and economical imperatives that may or may not have encouraged its proliferation, it is possible to excavate a different picture than those explored thus far. In her highly influential and oft-cited article, 'Makeover Takeover', Rachel Moseley (2000) suggests that the terms of 'public service broadcasting' have certainly changed as a result of the BBC obligation to purchase from independent production companies, and that the proliferation of the television market has given rise to consumer-led programming. Moseley though is more cautious about explanations that centre the 'feminisation' of genres, or the 'soaping' of documentary. Instead, she points to the ways in which these genre changes are transformations of the ways in which private and public space is articulated; reality television for her is primarily concerned with the foregrounding of high emotion and ordinariness. These articulations, Moseley suggests, are bound up with transformations in intimacy more widely, in which public space can be precariously staged as private. Her examples are fashion makeover programmes, in which she suggests the moment of high drama – the 'reveal' of the new self to the participant who has been made over – foregrounds the moment of revelation as the spectacle. We can also see how this can work in vice versa, in programmes where private space is precariously staged as public. In more obvious ways, this might include inviting a film crew into domestic space, but it also can include other tropes of the confessional, such as the interweaving of 'private' video diary footage within the programme.

It is through 'making over' and transforming subjects that much reality television creates narrative and drama. These transformations may be enacted through the forms of swaps or challenges or simply through the appearance and guidance of an expert who offers up judgement, rules and guidelines for improvement and then shadows the makeover subject while they attempt (and invariably fail) to 'live' their new regime.

The topic of lifestyle programming, principally the television makeover, received for some time far less academic attention than other genres within reality television such as gameshows. Gareth Palmer (2004) suggested that this absence of intellectual interest may be intertwined with the 'dumbing-down' thesis of culture, which both obscures rather than elucidates the concerns of the genre and (mis)interprets the 'ordinary' as the 'trivial'. Palmer follows Moseley and argues that lifestyle television is illustrative of a new discursive formation, in which individuals need not be bound by convention and expectation, in which they can 'be all they can be'. For Palmer this is the 'soft side of the empowerment thesis' and these programmes are part of a much wider re-imagining of the individual as a project upon whom work needs to be done. He draws specific links between lifestyle programming with the philosophies articulated by various writers within the Personal Development Movement; principally that the individual is placed at the centre of the world, that the individual is self-willed and focused, that the individual comes before society and so any change must be effected at the level of the individual and that through working out, planning, and setting goals, the individual can learn and celebrate responsibility for oneself. Palmer situates PDM philosophies within enterprise culture, and suggests that lifestyle television, as a dramatic visualisation of those

philosophies, 'offers quick emotional returns without any complicating societal narrative'" and in doing so appears to 'eradicate the 'end' of class' (2004: 15). This eradication is only surface deep though, since class is apparent in lifestyle television, through the learning of middle-class deportment and taste. Palmer argues that the lifestyle experts are in some senses reincarnations of Victorian etiquette guides; except that class then was marked, apparent and divisive, whilst class now operates through the more subtle systems of taste.

The experts of transformational television may offer guidance in terms of style and fashion, but in more hybrid formats the forms of governmentality they offer may be enacted through recourse to other kinds of authority too. In her analysis of the United States programme *Judge Judy*, Laurie Ouellette (2004) excavates the rules for living offered by courtroom judge Judy Sheindlin, whose authority is legitimated through her status as privatised bestower of court justice. Judge Judy in Ouellette's analysis is a vehicle through which television viewers are trained to function as 'self-disciplining, self-sufficient, responsible, risk-averting individuals' (2004; 232). Justice itself can be outsourced to television, and the programme becomes a more efficient route for pointing out who is at fault in its 'citizenship lesson'. Ouellette excavates the promise of empowerment – not coercion – that permeates *Judge Judy* and traces the liberal feminist discourse that underpins these notions of empowerment. In this sense her analysis has a complex sense of the contradictory kinds of agency that are promoted and presumed by the programme. *Judge Judy* promotes female independence and agency and extols the female plaintiffs to cultivate their self-esteem, economic security through

mantras of choice and self-sufficiency; but it can only do this by presuming that social and gender equality is guaranteed. Vocabularies of injustice and inequality are replaced by the discourse of the self-made 'victim'; a seductive neoliberal notion which resonates across other formats at the 'soft side of empowerment' too.⁷

In the next chapter, I stake out the methodological approach I take in this thesis, attempting to build upon the bodies of literature I have examined in both this chapter and the preceding one and re-orient them critically towards the set of methodologies I use in my excavation of *Supernanny* and the parenting culture it is anchored within. This methodological approach pays attention to both the discourses of classlessness that are embedded within neoliberal makeover culture and to the tenacious story, repeated across policy and culture, that social class is dead. It also pays careful attention to the work of critical feminist theorists discussed in the previous chapter, whose approach to the postfeminist idealisation of empowerment-through-choice is absolutely central in a consideration of the subtle power matrices that are mobilised by parenting culture.

⁷ Laurie Ouellette expands upon these themes in her 2008 work with James Hay. Ouellette and Hay's post-welfare neoliberalism perhaps finds its most apt expression in *Labour and Materials* (2006- , Al Sharqiya, Iraq) a home makeover show for Baghdad citizens whose homes had been destroyed in the UK/US invasion and occupation of Iraq. Director Ali Hanoon states that the objective of the programme is not simply to rebuild homes, but to change the psychology of the family during rebuilding.

Chapter 3 – From eyes and ears: methodological approach

In this chapter I explore the methodological dilemmas that have emerged from debates around the subject and subjectivity, the complex relationship between this subject and cultural texts and the theoretical problems of terms such as ideology, power and freedom. These dilemmas seemed particularly important in terms of the discourses of classlessness, choice and empowerment that both underpin the specific genre of instructional television ('be who you want to be'), and pervade cultural conversations about the pluralisation of expert knowledges surrounding parenting. The contemporary availability of a range of different childrearing knowledges, as I have explored in Chapter 1, is often used to tell a story of childrearing advice which begins with the absolute authority of the physician, and ends with the empowered parent who is able to choose freely how they will raise their children. The narratives that have been put together by historians of parenting advice position the desires and wishes of the 'elite mother' pioneers as a template for parental demands that have now been disseminated to all parents. Childrearing advice in these accounts, having emerged from the demands of parents themselves who are imbued with a universal capacity to choose freely between different philosophies, emerges untainted by ideology and simply the result of neutral, scientific 'truths' of child development. This progressive story of empowerment and plurality also forms the foundation of contemporary governmental interventions, which are rationalised precisely upon the basis of an imagined parental demand for guidance and advice. The notion of 'demand' implies already a

particular kind of parent, one who operates autonomously and with power, and this seductive rationale sidesteps the need to consider critically how this specific category of parent – the parent who is demanding advice – is constructed through advice itself.

The kind of analysis I develop in this thesis steps back from the rationalist assumptions of choice and empowerment through advice and instruction. The data I collected was saturated with anxiety about failure, shame and the painful struggle to find a version of one's parenting life that one could both live with and that could fit within contemporary landscapes of parental morality, ethics and principles.

Whilst I want to retain a sense of the ways in which parenting advice, including that disseminated through the *Supernanny* text, is never ideologically innocent, I also want to avoid some of the pitfalls associated with applying in a straightforward way the concept of ideology to media and cultural texts. Principally, I do not want to suggest that the parents watching *Supernanny* are the passive victims of parenting ideology, or that the programme distorts or obscures some realm of 'real' parenting experience beyond representation. Nor do I wish to suggest that as a researcher, I possess a unique ability to see through the machinations of the programme. One of the important decisions I was asked to make in an early stage of this thesis concerned the method I intended to use in my analysis of *Supernanny* as to whether I planned to work from transcripts of the programmes, or directly from the visual material. At the time, it had not occurred to me that the option I pursued would impact all that much on the analytical work I was planning. I anticipated that both would

give me reasonable access to the meanings and positions offered up within the programme, that I could use either transcripts or the visual to pursue or evidence a line of argument, that each would be reproducible within the body of my thesis, either as script excerpt or screen capture. Did it really matter from which register I worked; the eye or the ear?

My presumption was that I could use either audio or visual registers to similar effect and with similar confidence. Either register, I supposed, would enable me to first dismantle the programmes and second to flesh out my analytical inquiry. On reflection, I would suggest that this approach requires us to operate under something of a Cartesian privilege, in which cultural analysis is only ever a pursuit of the rational mind; I am able, through my eyes and ears, to dismantle my object of study, an object which is inert, slack matter, of use only in terms of fleshing out the endeavours of the critical mind. The explanatory power of conventional cultural studies might suggest that excavating meaning from cultural texts is simply a case of looking hard enough; that there is *a* meaning which is decipherable and knowable. Nick Couldry (2000) discusses the conceits that operate within this version of cultural studies in his attempt to re-imagine and 're-image' its method. The critic, researcher or cultural analyst makes an error of value judgement in assuming that his or her textual reading is the authoritative or 'correct' one. I was in danger early on of being swept away by the fantasy of becoming the 'analytically brilliant semiotician' that Couldry insists we remain suspicious of:

Such value judgements are stabilising devices in textual fields which, in reality, are far from stable – or at least so complex that we have as yet few reliable means of describing where their stability lies. (2000:68)

Media and cultural texts do not simply *mean*. Rather, they are *made* to mean, interpreted and received in radically different ways by a variety of audiences. I became interested in the ways in which this meaning is struggled over and lived by subjects who encounter the text. Whilst in many ways about power, we cannot presume that they are simply loci of domination in any straightforward way. Rather – if we are to adopt the re-imaging of cultural studies as suggested by Couldry – we need to see texts as sites of contestation over meaning; including the contestations made by researchers when they claim that the texts they choose to examine *are* meaningful. What makes this text a more worthy object for study than that one? Are texts always meaningful? In what ways do they function as texts - through engagement, partly organised distraction, discontinuous attentions? Couldry has no simple answers. In his unravelling of the text itself as an object of study, he illuminates possible theoretical alternatives to the text that other cultural thinkers have pursued, including 'textual fields' (de Certeau, 1984), continuums of cultural attentiveness (Hermes, 1995), gigantic archives for sense-making (Hartley, 1996) and promiscuous textual encounters (Johnson, 1996). These debates around textuality are ongoing within cultural studies, and I cannot do them justice here. I do however want to gesture to the significance of these questions to this thesis; for, despite the vogue for decentering the text, this thesis resolutely centres one text in particular. I present a rationale for the text in question,

Supernanny, in that it satisfies Couldry's criteria of being 'emblematic' (see Chapter 4 for a closer discussion of its cultural significance). My selection and centring of one specific text is a stabilising device; it allows me to unpack one 'cultural moment', in, I hope, productive ways. Whilst this expediency does perhaps flatten out at the necessary expense of the byzantine and intricate cultural worlds – the 'textual fields' – in which we make sense of ourselves, I believe that the methodological approach I take does create space in which these textual fields can be gestured towards.

This thesis, then, is motivated by a set of questions about the dynamic processes of making meaning, constructing a sense of ourselves that we can live with. What is the nature of the relationship between the textual and cultural resources through which we make sense of ourselves and our lived experiences of being in the world? How can we make sense of this relationship? What are the terms of the encounter between text and subject? Are subjects coerced into particular viewing positions? What happens when subjects do not recognise the positions offered up to them? Is the text remade and refashioned according to the

Texts and contexts

Many theoretical battles which have been fought over the proportion of power that is exercised by both producers and consumers of texts, the significance of the context of

viewing as opposed to the significance of the text viewed, and the nature of the relationship between audiences, content, ideology and power. These debates are rich, complex, and the matter of many fine conceptual discussions across a range of disciplinary fields, including film theory (Mulvey, 1975) cultural and media studies (McRobbie, 2005; Ang, 1995) and sociology (Hall, 1978; Morley, 1980). A set of particular approaches to the relationship between textual content of cultural and media texts and the audiences that consume them emerge from these debates, each stressing a specific nuance in the relationship. Some schools of thought, stress the powerful ideologies, beliefs and ideas of media producers, which are transmitted to passive audiences who, ill-equipped to resist, end up imitating and internalising. Others took a more positive view of media consumers and pointed with confidence to the ways in which active audiences satisfy and gratify themselves in their competent use of media and cultural texts. Every history must start somewhere, and so I begin with David Morley's classic and highly influential *Nationwide* study (1980) as it is an admirable exploration of the ways in which subjectivities, and specifically social class, intersect with the interpretation and reading of cultural texts, which represents an important shift in debates about social class, the self and subjectivity.

In the introduction to the *Nationwide* study, Morley drew on Stuart Hall's (1973) 'encoding/decoding' model. Both Hall and Morley were concerned to distance their work from mass communication work, which they argued oscillated between analysis of texts (content analysis) and analysis of effects (audience research). Both methodologies, they argued, always presumed that meanings are transmitted and did not conceive of texts

themselves as structuring meanings (Thornham, 2001). The model that Hall proposed, and that Morley took up and tested in the *Nationwide* study, proposed instead that cultural meanings generated in the encounter between text and audience were the result of a great deal of problematic and often contradictory work. Texts do not contain in themselves one meaning, which we can extract as media theorists, but rather are polysemic and unfinished. This does not mean, though, that audiences can choose freely from an infinite number of readings, for the Hall-Morley model insists that within this multi-layered and multi-referential polysemy a *hierarchy of preferred* readings are textually inscribed. Morley's study divided respondents into groups of age, class, occupation, race and so on and pointed to the impact that these social and historical viewing positions had upon the textual readings of the viewers. Morley argued that his approach represented a break from psychology-influenced media theorists who considered the audience to be an aggregate of passive individuals, 'who apparently bring nothing to the viewing situation but take everything away from it' (Gray, 1992:5).

Morley's insistence upon the empirical exploration of how the audience encountered the text, as already socially structured subjects, was one attempt to bring some sociological discrimination to cultural studies, which he argued had often failed to account meaningfully for the socio-cultural context in which audiences experienced texts. It was also bound up with his suspicion, shared by Hall, of the film studies tradition of textual analysis (particularly that espoused by the journal *Screen*), which, for Morley and others, focused on the ways in which texts position viewers and construct subjectivities. 'Screen theory' as it

became known, drew on psychoanalytic traditions and terms to make claims about the relationship between texts, language and ideology and the ways in which this relationship produced subject positions. The preference that screen theorists had for exploring textual subject positions was problematic for Morley, in so far as it removed the text-subject relationship from history and universalised textual interpellation at the expense of considering how audiences encounter texts *already positioned*. Ever careful not to reproduce economic determinism, Morley insists that although economic classes do not carry around unitary and predictable sets of worldviews 'like numberplates on their backs' (1992: 69), they do encounter texts with different sets of cultural competencies, discursive repertoires and decoding strategies. The class dynamism and the fluidity and contradiction of the meaning-making process in Morley's work represents one of the most interesting moments in the reconfiguration of social class and culture. He argues, retrospectively, that only the most 'utterly mechanistic' model of class would look for a rigidly determined relationship between class and reading in the first place; he is emphatic that both he and Hall were working with a model of class that was much more complex:

[T]hrough which structural position might function to set parameters to the acquisition of cultural codes, the availability (or otherwise) of which might then pattern the decoding process. (1992: 12)

Rather than causal relationships between context and reading, Morley argues that he was looking to find 'patternings', homologues or clusters of meaning-making in the encounter

between an already-socially-located subject and a text. The question of how to balance this kind of sociological sensibility of media studies, which explored context, with the psychoanalytic sensibilities of film theory, which explored text, is a debate which continues to spark controversy, despite acknowledgement from many academics that it is an 'unproductive conceptual dualism' (Gray, 1992:16). Morley raises many pertinent criticisms regarding screen theory, including the lack of empirical contribution, the universalistic tendencies in terms of the theorisation of subject positions, and the neglect of the social positionings of differently located subjects and the subsequent interpretations and meanings they make of and from texts. However, in rejecting wholesale the contribution of psychoanalytic film theory to the question of subjectivity, Morley throws out several babies with his bathwater, to which I now turn.

In his rejection of psychological approaches to media, and specifically of screen theory, Morley insists upon moving the terms of the psychoanalytic to the social subject, one who encounters the text already located. But, as Lisa Blackman and Valerie Walkerdine point out, this focus merely 'replaces psychologism with sociologism' (2001: 59). Morley's subject, formed and acquiring competencies through social forces, shares many similarities with the socio-cognitive subject of psychology; both are assumed to be self-aware, self-reflexive and self-directing. Blackman and Walkerdine remind us that however convinced we may be that we have 'left psychology behind', the pre-given psychological subject continues to saturate media approaches such that adopted by Morley. We still have the problem of how to account for where this subject is formed. For Blackman and

Walkerdine, Morley's suspicion and refusal to step over the psychoanalytic threshold – something he shares with many media and cultural theorists – means that his construction of a social subject repeats many of the problems of the pre-given psychological subject.

Virginia Nightingale (1996) argues that the Hall-Morley model merely repeats the structuralism/culturalism binaries, with 'the audience', now socially located, carrying the burden of potential resistance. This means that the analysis remains, 'in essence', textually focused. In her review of these debates as they pertain to gender, Sue Thornham (2001) suggests that once engagement with the text is bracketed out as a relationship that produces meanings,

[W]e are no longer talking about the construction of gendered subjectivities – simply about the ways in which, as already gendered audience members, our viewing preferences might differ (2001: 191)

So where does this leave us? As Nightingale suggests, it is Stuart Hall's refusal to engage with the work of Foucault that most severely impedes the encoding/decoding model.

Although Morley does move towards discourse theory in his later work, the *Nationwide* study too is obstructed in this way. I want to consider how staging an encounter between the useful aspects of Morley's already socially located subject with the discursive approach to subjectivity can lead us to a conceptual territory beyond realist critique.

'A subject reads a text': beyond realist cultural studies

Blackman and Walkerdine (2001) suggest that the approaches to subjectivity that conceive of the subject as presocial and prediscursive – existing already, before cultural encounters – might best be termed 'modernist'. In these approaches, the realm of the symbolic is held to mediate subjectivity in a peripheral fashion; at most distorting what is already there. In this modernist paradigm, a subject is held to read a text; the problem of textuality for modernist critique begins and ends with the call for more realistic texts and less cultural distortion of the world as it is experienced by flesh and blood subjects that encounter them. This approach to the relationship between representation and the individual is rehearsed across spaces of identity politics.

Other approaches to subjectivity have sought to decentre the individual and to collapse the individual/social dualism that is repeated in many bodies of work, including the encoding/decoding model. Discursive explorations of subjectivity (Foucault, 1977, 1979; Rose, 1991) have argued that the subject is entirely constituted in and through signification itself. In this sense, it is not that 'a subject reads a text' but that the encounter between text and subject is productive in two directions; both subject and text are mutually constituted through the act of reading. The term 'subjectivity' in these discursive approaches signals a collection of work, including structuralism and post-structuralism, that seek to trouble ideas about the self as the centre of experience, as unitary and as stable. Psychology, for example, is not the source of truth about the self, but rather indicates a

range of ways that we might talk about the self, with particular self-discourses flourishing at particular times and within certain regimes of truth (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The self is a fiction which, using Foucault's phrase, 'functions in truth'; self-discourses *speak us*, they provide us with livable fictions through which we are produced as subjects.

In discursive approaches to subjectivity, aspects of personality, character or attitudes are not seen as properties of the self or of the mind, nor are they reflective or expressive of some interior truth. Instead, they are cultural strategies, stories and narratives that individuals deploy to produce subject positions to inhabit. These self-stories are constructive, productive and generative, and also contingent, contradictory and dynamic.

Morley is, rightly, concerned that taking an approach which locates cultural texts as interpellations to 'the subject' is universalist and takes the text out of history and material reality. Yet, as discursive approaches have demonstrated, the text is always located within material history. To examine textual interpellations is to examine ideology. For Louis Althusser, it is ideology that transforms individuals into subjects; "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (1969 in 2000: 34). This process of hailing or interpellation is what produces the subject as a possibility in the first place; in other words, subjectivity is constituted for the viewer thus addressed. Althusser's concept of interpellation has been used by some media theorists examining how advertising images call out or speak to individuals by hailing them as subjects; it has also been staged by artists, such as Barbara Kruger's (1987) 'I Shop

Therefore I am' series. Throughout this thesis I will demonstrate how parenting advice texts – once books and manuals, and now websites, magazines and television programmes – hail a particular parental subject, one who is oriented towards parenting, children and their 'needs', and the future, in specific and insidious ways. As such they are remarkably productive in terms of subject positions.

Foucault's approach to the self in some senses speaks in valuable ways to Althusser's concept of interpellation. Where Althusser (1969) views the process of interpellation as hailing the subject into being, he also writes of the truth beyond hailing. Interpellation acts as a kind of veil, a distortion or misrepresentation of the world beyond ideology. In this way, Althusser recoups a proto-Marxist sense of false consciousness; subjectivity is like a clouding of the lens through which we see the world and ourselves. Foucault, on the other hand, insists that subjectivity *is* the lens through which we see, and without which we would not be able to. Although he speaks of fictions, he does not suggest that this can be counterposed to 'fact' in any way, or that they are the vain imaginings or distortions of the misguided; the fictions through which we live 'function-in-truth'. They are felt as real because they *are* real.

In this thesis I develop a methodological approach that attempts to 'flesh out' (McRobbie, 2005) the Althusserian notion of interpellation. Morley's sniffiness around Althusser is partly motivated by his uncertainties about the Althusserian debt to Lacanian theory, and his concern that this debt reproduces notions of a single, original and mythic subject. He is in

good company here; feminist theorists, particularly those drawing on the intellectual legacy of Pierre Bourdieu, have suggested that the Althusserian subject is something of an empty category, and appears unmarked by facets of difference such as gender, class and race.

Therapy culture and makeover texts certainly interpellate and promise a particular kind of late-modern subject. But does this interpellation necessarily rehearse ideas of a unitary subject? What, then, are these promises? Who is this subject? At a literal level, these texts of improvement promise to transform excessive, unruly, unsightly or otherwise 'bad' habits, practices and tendencies, and to replace them with something better, more effective or efficient, more attractive or healthier. In the process of replacement though, something else is transformed; the relationship of participants to themselves. We might read this as a promise of a new self; 'the new you' or the 'you' you always wanted, hoped or desired to be. This promise of an overhaul, a substitution or an entirely new construction of fabrication of self is sometimes the explicit promise of makeover. However, I would argue that we need to appreciate a more subtle promise here. The 'new you' cannot be conjured from nowhere, like a rabbit from a hat. Rather, this 'new you' is held to have 'always' been there, obscured or silenced by the bad habits, practices and tendencies of the old you; the new you is, and always was, the 'inner you', bursting to come out, aching and itching to be released. This is not the 'you' you always wanted to be; it is the 'you' you suspected yourself to be all along. The rabbit was always in the hat to start with. The genre of self-improvement television invites us to reflect upon the concept of subjectivity itself. Do these programmes rehearse essentialist or post-structuralist notions of the self? Are they operating under the promise to make-over or reveal; to construct or to discover the self?

I would suggest that these interpellations do not rehearse a unitary self; rather they rehearse anxieties about the self. Adopting a discursive approach does not necessarily mean that we must presume that the subject thus interpellated is already constituted in a final, stable and unitary way according to universal psychic mechanisms, as Morley fears. Rather, the interpellative subject's work is never done, transformations are never final, but 'shaky and partial' at best (Walkerdine, 1990). Shifting the focus from a sense of the sociologically constituted subject to an interpellative subject means we can explore the complex relationship of subjects to power and knowledge. One of Foucault's most significant theoretical contributions to these debates around subjectivity concerned the nature of power. He presented a profound challenge to the Marxist underpinnings of much social and cultural analysis by suggesting that power is not a property possessed and executed by one group over another, but rather, that power functions like a capillary system; it is everywhere. Exercised strategically as a network of associations, different bodies of knowledge, experts and agents, within specific historical regimes of truth. Power is not repressive in the Foucaultian model; it is productive, dynamic and contingent.

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?

(in 'Truth and Power', interview with Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, in Gordon, 1980)

Following Walkerdine's (1990) research on the inscriptions of fantasy and desire that are produced within girl's comics, I want to bypass what she, among others, has called the 'realist' approach to textual critique. This realist approach presumes that pre-given psychological subjects who encounter texts are always and already constituted and formed in relation to class, sex, gender and so on. Within realist criticism, texts are deemed problematic only insofar as they are biased, misrepresentative or distortive of a reality that is already lived. Walkerdine's question does not concern how girls adopt or identify with normative femininity, but rather, how do we become psychically invested in discourses of normalization and pathology? What do we gain when we become subjected to, and subjects of, discourse? Walkerdine draws on the affinity of feminist cultural analysis with psychoanalysis, in which both presumes that this 'subjecting' is never finished, but is always characterized by struggle and anxiety. It is here that a psychoanalytically influenced reading of identity is useful. Within the psychoanalytic tradition, 'failures of identity' are not simply instances of pathology or abnormality, but 'failing' is itself constitutive of identity; that failures can be understood as "something endlessly repeated and relived moment by moment throughout our individual histories" (Rose, 1983: 9, quoted in Walkerdine, 1990:103).

I take as one of the starting points of this thesis the claim that parental identities are an effect of discourse, an invitation to occupy particular subject positions. Subjects do not encounter culture already formed in and through social relations, but rather, in those encounters struggle with and become invested within the very discursive mechanisms that interpellate

them. In her more recent work, Walkerdine (2003) develops her argument that these invitations are situated within psychological models, such as theories of personality. Such models create a regime of truth in which the language of psychology has come to replace a grammar of exploitation. A critical appraisal of these psychological languages is absolutely necessary if we are to problematise identities as discursive effects rather than as pre-formed and given, which is the direction that I take in Chapter 4 where I explore the process of subjectification – the production of subject positions within discursive frameworks – which is constructed through instructional parenting television. I argue that the complexities of the self within instructional television of the how-to-live variety betray many of the tensions of meritocratic discourses of ‘classlessness’. I explore how particular theories of the self, specifically within the work of Anthony Giddens, are themselves constitutive of a particular regime of truth of the self.

In the sections that follow, I explore the ways in which social class has been reconsidered within contemporary sociology. First, in the decline in the theoretical significance of class in sociological theory and more recently in a ‘renaissance’ (Gillies, 2005), largely through the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his emphasis on analysing class as a set of cultural processes taking place within specific social fields. I then situate these reconfigurations of class as an aspect of subjectivity within the methodology I use, that troubles realist cultural studies and draws upon transformations within sociology that shift the terms of debates around class from structure and stratification, to culture and processes of subjectification. In this way, I want to address the concerns of media theorists, such as David Morley, that an

appropriation of psychoanalytic concepts within a discursive framework means that social differences like class become negated and the subject acquires an a-historical texture.

The sociological imagining of class and the decline of class theory

Historically, the discipline of sociology emerged largely through a concern with the changes brought about by modernity and how this impacts upon the study of social class and stratification within society. The sociological interest in issues of mobility, distributions of wealth and differences in life-chances has led to sociology sometimes being dismissively referred to as 'socialist studies' or as the intellectualisation of socialism. A number of systems for defining different kinds of social class have been developed, with most relying upon categories of labour, occupation and employment to locate individuals in specific class locations. Charles Booth (1889) in the nineteenth century conducted expansive surveys into the empirical conditions of the poor, as did Henry Mayhew (1851). The Registrar-General's census has classified social class in terms of occupation and employment status since the 1951 census; thirteen socio-economic occupational groups (later increased to seventeen) were dispatched into six socio-economic classes, on the understanding that within these classes, people had similar life-styles, as well as social, cultural and leisure behaviour. Similarly, Goldthorpe's classification scheme revises class categories and proposes eleven categories, which retain the centrality of occupation and labour.

The concept of social class became elaborated and refined between the 1940s and 1970s in a time often romantically referred to as the 'golden years' of stratification research (Devine and Savage, 2005:4). The revival of Marxism within British cultural studies, particularly within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, was an attempt to reconfigure the concept of social class as more than an experience of particular incomes, occupations and employment statuses, into a configuration of particular cultural and lifestyle experiences. Much of the work that emerged out of this 'cultural turn' emphasised the resistance and expressiveness of particular cultures and subcultures, tied into the context of class consciousness and class imagery. Devine and Savage suggest that the concern to establish associations between class position and class consciousness was mediated through the 'S-C-A' approach adopted within many of these studies, in which consciousness becomes the intermediary between structure and action.

The decline of class theory began in the 1980s, curiously a period characterized by, if anything, *growing* socioeconomic inequality (Savage 2000). How could this be? The decline is complex. The decline of heavy industry and de-industrialisation, the rise of service occupations and the growth of consumer culture and lifestyle led to a number of prominent sociologists claiming that 'post-industrial' society was on the way to becoming unfettered by old class loyalties and communities. For these sociologists, contemporary society was better characterized as one of risk and mobility (Beck, 1992) or individualisation and de-traditionalisation (Giddens, 1991, 1998). Several intertwined theoretical trends, such as

postmodernism, emphasised self-making, choice and plasticity over ascriptive and static ties. Stratification research was initially blind to those other facets of identity which intersect with social class, such as ethnicity and gender; in a case of the-shoe-on-the-other-foot, the rise of identity politics led to the gradual eclipse of class, and eventual substitution by interest in other markers of difference. This in many ways repeated the error of additive identities, in which the subject is considered to only be able to ever inhabit one 'identity' at a time. Nancy Fraser (2001) argues that this shift from a politics of redistribution to a politics of recognition – as 'new' categories of gender, race, sexuality and nationalism gather momentum as sources of identity – means that redistribution, despite being already implicated within recognition, becomes considered politically naïve. Steph Lawler (2005a) draws on Fraser's work to suggest that discourses of 'classlessness', far from abolishing class, are formed in the context of meritocratic principles, whereby class can be transcended through 'equality of opportunity'. Lawler argues that the promise of classlessness is therefore intimately bound up with class, as a promise to conquer the 'problem' of class. Once class is reconceived as a 'problem' with specific solutions, the material foundations of inequality recede and the 'lifestyle choices' of those bearing the burdens of this problem (the working-class) take centre stage. Chris Haylett (2003) argues that the existence of working class conditions, such as hardship and exploitation, often become elided through policy discussions of 'cultures' which need to be transformed.

[T]arget problems easily become targeted lives, little more than the adjuncts of rationalistic theory... Working-class cultures are positioned at the apex of these troubles, as

problematic, in need and usually 'in receipt' but not capable of giving or teaching anything of worth to dominant centres of value. (2003:57)

Added to this theoretical embrace of 'classlessness', the 1980s and 1990s can also be seen as a time of huge shifts within political discourse, from 'social class' to 'social inclusion'.

Margaret Thatcher's famous declaration that 'there is no such thing as society' referred to the belief in classlessness, that the structures of stratification held literally no meaning in an age of entrepreneurial self-making. Thatcher's comment is as much a dismissal of the trade unions that attempted to fend off her programmes of de-industrialisation as it is an interpellation of the new ideal citizen, a subject who was above all an individual. Val Gillies (2005) points to the power of this emerging language of individualization and discusses the ways in which it has reshaped the political landscape, with welfare policy reform substituting the redistribution of wealth with the redistribution of possibilities, and the branding of those who still speak of class loyalties and identities as 'losers'.

Thus, poverty and privilege, once discussed in terms of wealth redistribution and attached to the concept of class, have been redefined by inclusion exclusion debates, which sideline issues of inequality and foreground individual life-choices and conduct. Lack of material resources is then represented as a symptom of exclusion rather than its cause. (Gillies, 2005: 19)

Bourdieu's key concepts

There has been something of a 'renaissance' in class theorizing (Gillies, 2007: 20-21), led largely by the revisiting of the work of Pierre Bourdieu by feminist sociologists (Reay, 1998a; Lawler, 2000; Skeggs 1997, 2004). The rise of sociological class theory was, as many theorists have pointed out, really the rise of theory emerging from the study of *working-class* communities. A particular classed body of society became subjected to measurement and categorization through the use of surveys, statistics and the use of records within spaces of education and medicine in a process Janet Finch (1993) has termed 'the classing gaze'. There are a number of consequences to this myopic classing gaze, in which middle-class sociologists peer at working-class objects for study. In a kind of parallel to classical anthropology, the 'peer' operates in one direction only, and the gaze cannot be returned or challenged. The fantasy and projection of middle-class gazers onto working-class objects becomes invisible (Skeggs 2004) and the working class becomes a site for aberration, pathology and inadequacy. Similarly, some have claimed that the focus on structural classification as the mechanism through which class can be understood also leads to a certain myopia about value and morality, and the texture of social distinction itself. Andrew Sayer (2002) discusses the elevation of dispassionate objectification of class as endemic to the learning of 'sociological thinking' itself, pointing to how the unease and evasion of class by sociology students is undervalued:

While experienced sociologists might put the novices' unease down to naivety about sociology, and feel superior about their ability to confront class dispassionately, I would suggest there is something to be said for inverting that valuation: while the beginning students have not yet unlearned their very justifiable sense (albeit a scarcely articulated sense) of the moral problems of class, sociologists have unlearned them and become desensitized to them. (2002: 2.2)

For Sayer, it is sociologists' 'blasé amorality which is at fault' (2002: 1.6) and the reluctance to examine critically the moral and ethical aspects of class which has led to the decline in class theory, as well as the unexamined unease with which people continue to live classed identities whilst remaining uneasy about articulating class. The re-emergence of class theory has been given a fresh lease of life with Bourdieu's concepts, and his impact upon the renaissance of the theorization of class cannot be underestimated. Bourdieu's interest in how people develop a practical mastery of the world, and how the acquisition and practice of these masteries reproduce inequalities, provides us with a template for understanding social class in much more dynamic and fluid ways than conventional stratification theory can. His conceptual trinity of *habitus*, *capital* and *field* reframes social class as a generative, contradictory and ambivalent set of differences that are neither static nor stable.

Throughout his work, Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to refer to a generative scheme of dispositions; these dispositions include bodily practices, improvisations, movements, and

modes of speaking and walking, as well as orientations towards oneself, culture and the world, such as attitudes and ways of thinking and feeling about the future. Subjects acquire and develop their habitus through socialisation, principally within the home, and their habitus subsequently takes them out into the world beyond. Bourdieu refers to the habitus using many terms; sometimes referring to 'practical habituation', a 'second sense', a 'practical sense' or 'a feel for the game'. For Bourdieu, practical mastery is not simply conscious and theoretical, but nor is it unconscious and repressed; he uses the word *doxa* to refer to the taken-for-granted, or experience beyond reflection. This doxic experience and the habitus that underpins it helps take class theorising away from conscious reflection. This is particularly important when we remember the problems faced by stratification theorists who struggled to account for social class when it was not consciously spoken of by subjects. In Bourdieu's terms, when subjects do not demonstrate class consciousness or do not explicitly identify their class location, this does not mean that they exist outside of social class. Indeed, what characterises habitus is the naturalness with which it is inhabited by subjects. It is not spoken because it does not *need* to be spoken; it exists at a pre-reflective, bodily level, or, in Bourdieu's terms, 'the habitus makes coherence and necessity out of accident and contingency' (1977: 87). The concept of habitus enables us to theorise the natural, comfortable and taken-for-granted aspects of childhood-learned sets of dispositions. Habitus provides a framework for thinking about a socially classed self in terms of an embodied subjectivity that one acquires and which endures, though in a way which is complex, dynamic and symbolic, and not simply an emanation of occupation or wealth. Habitus reorients class theorization within the world of everyday culture and of ways of

living and being within the world, as well as the comfort or unease with which people inhabit the world.

The background experiences and dispositions through which the subject navigates through the everyday shapes the ability with which they can play their resources. Bourdieu uses the term *capital* to identify different kinds of resources that may be played. Whilst he has been criticized for relying too heavily on the somewhat economic metaphor of 'capital' (Baert, 1998), Bourdieu's intentions in employing this term was to complicate visions of inequality which focus narrowly upon wealth and assets. Inequalities exist and are perpetuated across landscapes that are never simply economic or pecuniary. As such, this concept represents a serious challenge to advocates of wealth redistribution, and dissociates social class from the stifling and limiting classifications of the Registrar-General's occupation scale.

Bourdieu names four kinds of capital - economic, social, cultural and symbolic – and argues that it is through the inheritance and conversion of these capitals that bodies are able to move through social space and become subjects of value. Economic capital is straightforward enough as a concept, referring to income, wealth and financial assets. The error of conventional stratification theory is to *only* take account of economic capital, and whilst he agrees that the institutionalisation of the economic field tends to determine the remainder of social life, he also argues that if practitioners are to grasp the lived intricacies of social class, attention must be paid to the other three capitals in tandem. Social capital is for Bourdieu the value generated by 'who you know', associations, networks, relationships,

connections, communities and groups. Cultural capital is a more complex capital, in that it includes legitimated cultural knowledge and discourses that become embodied as dispositions, *as well as* cultural goods and objects. Cultural capital may also be informal (taste or style) or formal (qualifications). Cultural capital thus refers to both cultural competencies at the level of the habitus, as well as the cultural goods and practices that the subject demonstrates his or her competency *with*.

Symbolic capital is for Bourdieu a kind of meta-capital, into which other capitals become convertible through legitimation. In order for a capital to be transferable into symbolic power, it must be legitimated within the value system, and here lies the rub for Bourdieu.

Only certain kinds of capital are legitimated within the value system, and therefore some kinds of capital remain powerless within the wider cultural game. This is one of the ways in which Bourdieu's use of the term 'capital' is distinct from the ways in which it is employed by economists or by rational choice theorists; capitals are not universally exchangeable or equivalent in value, rather they are dependent upon the 'cultural arbitrary' which designates some activities, practices and cultural forms as valuable and others as not. For example, the value generated through physicality, aggression and machismo by working-class schoolboys was not legitimated by symbolic power within the institutional setting of the school (Willis, 1977). The value generated through 'babydaddy' kin networks is not converted into symbolic power outside the local estate (Stack, 1974; McKenzie, 2008). Only particular capitals count.

Bourdieu develops the relationship between habitus and capital through reference to the third term in his trinity, that of *field*. Field refers to the contexts in which capitals may be played. Bourdieu uses the term field rather than 'institution' to draw attention to the nature of conflict, rather than consensus, of social life, and to draw attention to the fact that social worlds may be weakly institutionalised and possess un-established boundaries; in short, the term 'field' implies struggle, in a way that the term 'institution' cannot (Swartz, 1997). Within any number of fields of social space, there are particular rules that may be implicit, unknown or in flux. One's individual habitus, or embodied dispositions, enables or constrains one within the 'field' or external environment. The dynamic between habitus, capital and field results, for Bourdieu, in a range of strategies and possibilities that may be enacted; but importantly, he argues that these strategies are unequally realized, depending upon the specific capitals that the individual can mobilize.

Bourdieu invites us to think of class as a cultural game, in which it is possible to convert economic, social and cultural capital into symbolic capital, a kind of meta-capital which delineates power. Only certain forms of these capitals are convertible in this way, whilst others are ridiculed, denigrated or otherwise framed as 'wrong'. Whilst knowledge about and consumption of fine art, theatre and classical music are culturally legitimized as valuable, and therefore a capital worth accruing in terms of symbolic power, other cultural practices and the knowledges accrued from them, such as listening to pop music, watching television or playing bingo, are not. In this way, certain forms of capital – middle-class forms – become sanctioned as 'correct', and whilst individuals may accrue other forms,

these capitals are not recognized or sanctioned and are therefore null and void in the wider game for symbolic power.

Although famously quite dismissive of cultural studies, referring to it as a 'mongrel domain' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999: 47, in McRobbie, 2005: 122), and critical of the ways in which much cultural studies romanticised working-class resistance, his conceptual trinity has proved immensely useful for cultural theorists. It also provides this thesis with the terms through which I can think through the relationship between ideology, subjectivity and action. Bourdieu 'fleshes out' the Althusserian subject. His conceptual trinity gives us ways of thinking about ideology – but ideology filled with subjecthood, with social agents who are embodied, inclined and oriented with a specific habitus. And although Bourdieu is keen to reclaim agency from structuralists, such as Althusser, who he felt had abolished the generativity of social action, and although he insists upon talking of 'agents, not subjects' (1990: 9), his theoretical approach does fit well with those who *do* prefer to talk of 'subjects' (including Foucault and those taking a Foucaultian approach). Bourdieu himself referred to the concept of habitus as a kind of 'socialised subjectivity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu and Foucault share a notion of power as autonomously exercised throughout society, social bodies, institutions and subjects – not just as a repressive possession of the state – as a dispersed, productive and generative strategy.

Thinking about television ethnographically – ‘the working classes watch parenting television and the middle classes read parenting books’

Bourdieu sketches out his reasons for preferring an analysis of social relations rather than textual relations in his empirically rich *Distinction*. He later revisits these objections in his work with Wacquant (1992), stating that the production of meanings within systems of signification is less interesting than the ways in which these meanings fit within a wider and social grid of classification and value. In short, he is interested with what agents do with these cultural meanings. In this, he sidesteps many of the preoccupations of semiology and delves straight into the heart of cultural power.

Under this formula, the act of watching a programme about parenting brings us into an interesting territory, not in so far as it produces dominant sets of meanings, but in terms of the ways in which those meanings become themselves a site for struggle in structured spaces – or fields – where social subjects jostle for position and symbolic power. Far from understanding the text as simply positive or negative, representative or distorted, the act of watching brings into play a wide range of simultaneous discourses, which may celebrate the possibilities of improvement or bettering oneself, or deride television as trashy and uncritical.

On the one hand, parenting television operates within the wider genre of makeover television, which signifies an interest in improving one’s parenting experience, capacities

and skills. Watching, observing and reflecting upon the programme becomes a kind of labour, in that the viewer is presented with regimes, techniques and schedules that they may practice and adopt within their own lives once the programme has ended. The successes that are narrated within the programmes are presented as common-sense; the neoliberal subject is interpellated through these visualisations, and the regimes are packaged and presented for this subject. In one sense, then, these programmes circulate 'idealised citizen subjectivities' and watching becomes a facet of neoliberal labours. On the other hand, television watching is already bound within cultural frameworks that are more ambivalent, and are mobilised in different ways for different subjects; the meaning of television watching is already inscribed within its position in the home, whether it is covered or on display, how wide the screen is, how often it is switched on;

[A]ll screens are technically the same, and the same programmes will be seen by millions, but their physical position in the households, their status as the focus of daily ritual, their incorporation into private and domestic lives will be as varied as the individuals and families who attend, and socially significant (or not) in their patterning and their persistence. Television is received in an already complex and powerful context. Households, families, are bounded, conflictful, contradictory. They have their own histories, their own lore, their own myths, their own secrets

(Morley and Silverstone, 1992: 201)

Watching television is an activity that can also be read as wasteful, lazy and passive. It may be something that has to be hidden, done secretly or as a 'guilty pleasure'. The amount and significance of the television culture we consume may be dismissed or downplayed. Television watchers, particularly housewives, may be constructed as uncritical cultural dopes, allowing a disruptive force into their homes which jeopardises their domestic capacities. Spigel (1986) argues that in the 1950s, television, like radio in the preceding years, was interpreted by many commentators as a threat to the moral order of the home and a distraction to women running their households. These anxieties about the central place of television in the home continue to operate, with movements such as TvFree lambasting the alienating and isolating effects of 'excessive' watching¹. Reality television in particular is seen to represent the very worst offerings from broadcasters. After a summer season in 2003 of 'debased' programming, or what apparently became known (at least in the press) as 'the summer of sick TV', the then-Culture Minister Tessa Jowell called for a viewer revolt (Piper, 2004). Even Dr Tanya Byron, the clinician and parenting expert who fronts the BBC programme *House of Tiny Tearaways* and who I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, has uttered her concerns. Having watched hours of daytime television whilst researching for a sitcom she was co-writing at the time, she remarks upon it in the interview:

¹ See <http://tvfree.trashyourtv.com> for an example of how television remains at the centre of moral panics around addiction, obesity, the decline of the family and rampant consumerism.

"And my God," she giggles, "no wonder so many people are depressed, if that's what they're watching every day." (Aitkenhead, 2007)

Parenting television, and the genre of instructional 'makeover' television more generally, sits in the complex position of both holding the promise of improvement and signifying stagnation and inactivity. Within what Bourdieu (1979) termed the 'cultural economy', struggles over cultural value and taste are fought, with cultural works including television becoming organised hierarchically. This takes us back in some ways to the 'polysemy' of the Hall-Morley encoding/decoding model, in which texts contain within them many possible meanings. But in stressing the place of analysis as the space in which subjects struggle over symbolic power (and not at the level of the text), Bourdieu shifts analysis to social spaces or fields. This meaning-making activity is not a matter for Morley's rather static already-socially-located subject, limited in his textual decoding by a set of cultural competencies and codes, but concerns the activation of different kinds of capital that the Bourdiean agent has at his disposal, within the habitus he inhabits. Television as a practice and an object is situated within a hierarchy of taste. Within television, different genres, and different programmes within those genres, come to hold different values as a result of cultural struggle within the field. The practice of watching television is one part of a much larger puzzle of social action, which may also include reading reviews of television programmes, reading or participating in an online discussion about a programme, discussing the programme as it is being broadcast with others who may be 'present' in a variety of ways (for example watching whilst speaking to someone on the telephone, discussing it

afterwards, reading preview or review articles or commenting in online spaces). *Supernanny* then, fits in complex ways within a much larger Bourdiean field of social practice. The programme itself is taken out into the world in dynamic and different ways by viewers; encountering and engaging with it, and playing one's capitals in this encounter becomes an opportunity for social distinction. The ambivalences around how to situate parenting television is perhaps well illustrated in one comment at a roundtable discussion on parenting and media – 'the middle classes read parenting books and the working classes watch parenting television'². Within the context of a largely critical discussion of television programmes about parenting, this comment situated 'watching television' as an activity within a hierarchy of the consumption of parenting advice, and invoked discourses of television 'dumbing-down' a written advice literature which was more valuable.

Cultural texts such as these are socially and historically located within cultural economies of taste in complex and contradictory ways. Although the genre of 'reality' may be derided as tasteless or vulgar in certain fields, it also dangles the promise of imparting cultural capital and how-to-live skills to those wise enough to heed the advice displayed within it. Where and how *Supernanny* fits into these cultural economies is a matter of struggle and contestation, and the parents that took part in this research certainly demonstrated the broad range of ways in which cultural texts might be inventively interpreted, refused or creatively incorporated by subjects. Remembering the debates around textuality and the

² Comment offered at 'Parenting expertise and the media', event held at Centre for Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities, Cambridge University, December 2007

issues raised by thinking of texts as bounded, discrete and concrete, I would suggest that *Supernanny* should be seen as part of a 'flow' of instructional texts which orient the viewer towards neoliberal, individualised, psychologised accounts of self-hood, and invite them to relate to themselves as if they were particular kinds of self; malleable, empowered, choosing, risk-assessing and imbued with an emotional work ethic. In this vein, media theorist Steve Neale suggests that:

[G]enres are not to be seen as forms of textual codifications, but as systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject (in Bennett et al 1981: 6).

Paying attention to the stories that participants told about their relationship with different formats of parenting advice – television programmes, manuals and books, magazines, websites – became in this thesis another way for mapping out the webs of meaning that we are born into, and of the ways in which distinction in the field of parenting is struggled over and sometimes achieved. For some of my participants, watching the programme represented the promise of a particular experience of family life that did not always feel possible. For forty-five minutes, however, they could suspend the messiness of their lives and imagine another way of living. They might talk about how they would put some of the advice on the screen into practice, or discuss the episode with friends the next day. They might become infuriated during viewing and shout at the television or hold one-way conversations with the screen families – a great proportion of the viewing encounters were

affective, emotional experiences (so much so that the periods of silence became in themselves noteworthy). For others, the idea of immersing yourself into a television programme – and a *reality* television programme to boot – seemed anathema to both their cultural economy and to the way they had decided to play their hand in the social field of parenting. These encounters became a constant critical commentary on the inappropriateness of the filming, the melodramatic tendencies of the edit, or the pithy quality of the advice. By paying attention to these, this thesis has a resonance with other work that examines the everyday use of culture and cultural texts, in particular the work of Joke Hermes (2005) whose analysis of women's magazines can be described as both sociology of the media and ethnography of magazine cultural use.

What does it mean to watch television ethnographically, or to use ethnographic methods in order to think about the ways in which parenting television is related to parenting social fields? I did not directly observe the ways in which parents interacted with their children, as some remarkable studies have done in order to explore how specific discourses regarding childrearing manifest themselves in material practice (in particular see Annette Lareau, 2003). Rather, I explored the viewing encounters that participating parents had with *Supernanny* and the articulations of subjectivity that this encounter prompted or elicited. I interviewed parents before viewing, sometimes alone, or in groups of two, three or four³,

³ Once recruited, I asked respondents whether they would prefer to participate alone or with friends and/or family. The only criteria I asked for with regards to the friends they enlist was that they too defined themselves as 'parents', biologically or otherwise. In this way, I secured an interesting mix of peer groups that were sometimes intimate groups of close friends, and other times groups of women who knew each other through various parenting activities. Two participants enlisted their husbands.

inviting them to offer their self-definitions in terms of their background and parenting philosophies. I asked them to narrate their relationship with different kinds of advice. I asked what they would consider to be good and poor parenting. I asked about their viewing habits. I then used the text-in-action method (developed by Helen Wood, 2005, 2007), in which we watched an episode of *Supernanny* together. The utterances, exclamations and spontaneous conversations that emerged during viewing were captured by a digital sound recorder. These during-viewing utterances have a very different feel from the parenting accounts offered during interview – they are less self-conscious, more conversational, more affective and saturated with emotion. The interview and text-in-action sessions, in tandem, offer a methodological combination which has ‘ethnographic intentions’ (Gray, 1992: 32). Woods herself sees the TIA method as enabling a more complex interrogation of the relationship between textuality and subjectivity, making space for ‘multi-accentuality’ not just *between* different ‘reception communities’ but also during and through the temporal rhythmns of television. Television, particularly talk-based, therapeutic, reality genres which foreground first-person confessional talk (Dovey, 2000) is often shifting and inconsistent, and the text-in-action method reflects that fluidity. This methodological tandem fits particularly well with the poststructuralist notions of subjecthood that I am drawing on and that I have discussed in this chapter, making space for an alternative approach to power and culture that is ‘dialogic not disruptive, affective rather than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational’ (Jenkins, cited in Woods, 2007: 76). I discuss this method in more detail in Chapter 7.

These viewing encounters are not simply about different cultural competencies, *per se*, different viewing preferences or decoding strategies. I do not take a sociological approach to subjectivity that begins with unequally positioned parents. Rather, I take an ethnographic approach to examining the ways in which the *Supernanny* text leaks out into the world, into the spaces and places that parents use, into the childrearing practices that they articulate themselves in relation to, and into the cultural games they felt able to play in the social field of parenting. In staking out my interest in the the Bourdieuan field of parenting as a set of processes in which there are opportunities for distinction, I also stake out my ethnographic field; for I also take the examination of *Supernanny* out of the living room and away from the television in Chapter 6. My interest in how spaces and places have become discursively marked by contemporary parenting culture takes me to the playground, to the cafes, restaurants and bars that open their doors to 'yummy mummies' and their children, to boutique clothing and toy stores and to an entire range of services, products and places that parents are invited to bring their children to in order to fulfil their 'needs', in the area in which I live. I use ethnographic writing practices and kept a photographic notebook in order to reflexively explore my experiences of these spaces as a subject who is gendered, raced and classed in particular ways.

In this chapter then, I have sketched out less a method, more a methodology (Skeggs, 1997); a combination of different methods that I use to interrogate the articulations, experiences and representations of parental subjectivities that are produced, reproduced, negotiated and refuted across social fields, processes and spaces. My commitment to a post-

structuralist notion of the subject, who is born into discursive webs that are remade in the production of a fictive self who is liveable, allows me to take the analytic work of this thesis in two directions. First, towards the discursive underpinnings of 'good parenting' and the ways in which it is made and remade across representational and cultural fields. Second, towards the uncertain, fragmented, 'shaky and partial' complexities of subject-making itself; the complex processes of identification, differentiation, refusal and dis-identification that happened in the viewing encounter itself.

Chapter 4 - Politicising parenting: Mobility, meritocracy and empowerment

Lets talk about on the way to school. They were throwing stones where there were *passing cars*.

You don't want them growing up, when they're thirteen, fourteen, you've got the old bill knocking on your door, Simon, they've got cheeky with a copper decided to throw a brick somewhere, lost his temper, you don't want that!

Jo Frost talks to the Brown-Smith Family (*Supernanny* Season 3 Episode 3)

In this television moment on *Supernanny*, the link of causality that is made between poor, incorrect or inadequate parenting of toddlers and young children, and later antisocial behaviour – a link that often remains unspoken – is foregrounded explicitly. The Brown-Smith family's two boys, Louis and Rhys, are introduced as 'tearaways', a language that invokes and reproduces moral panics about low-level nuisance behaviour from children and teenagers. Dad Simon 'can't resist a confrontation' with local teenagers hanging outside his house. He is angry when his eldest son prefers those teenagers to his own offer of flying a kite. But Simon's concerns are also narrated as contributory factors to the imagined antisocial future of his boys; his 'over-controlling' parenting style warping the discipline their mother struggles to enact.

How can we make sense of this moment? The complex politics of the bad behaviour of children and antisocial behaviour of teenagers is given short shrift in much reality television,

which narrates its causes and solutions in simplistic terms. To make sense of the ways in which these causes and solutions are produced and proffered requires us to look more closely at the social and cultural transformations around the terms of parenting itself. Notions of 'good parenting' have come to underpin an ever-broader range of social interventions; and without this good parenting, it is imagined that child 'tearaways' will inevitably grow into 'hooligans', 'yobs' and 'thugs'. The families which do the work and labour of child-rearing might continue to be imagined (albeit problematically) as sovereign or private spaces, yet that child-rearing itself has become the focus of action like never before. Childrearing, or more specifically 'parenting' as I discuss in this chapter, has taken centre stage, as both the cause of, and solution to, all manner of social problems, inequalities and injustices. In this juncture, 'the family' is (re)produced as an institution undergoing intense social upheaval, in decline and in fragile health; and at the same time as the most important site in which childrens' future aspirations and opportunities are set, apparently in stone.

Within this climate, *Supernanny* would become not only one of Channel 4's most successful programmes of the decade, but would also be exported to American markets, imitated globally and, most importantly, come to represent a constitutive rationale for subsequent family policy. The programme was an enormous success from the broadcast of its first episode, with viewing figures regularly reaching six and seven million (almost thirty per cent); an impressive figure, particularly within the context of television digitalisation and the proliferation of channel choices that it offers. In the competitive climate of television

makeover programmes, in which the schedule of any given week reveals dozens of variations on the theme of self-improvement (Skeggs, Woods and Thumim, 2008), it is necessary to reflect carefully upon which programmes become 'successful'. Although this period of reality, 'self-help' television also witnessed the broadcasting of several other competitor programmes that focused too upon the behaviour of children (see Chapter 2), it was *Supernanny* that acquired the largest audience share, secured an international contract with American broadcaster ABC and which has now reached its fifth season in the UK. It is *Supernanny* that has come to symbolise a 'thirst' for parenting expertise, at least as read by policy makers and ministers.

The success of *Supernanny*, I aim to show, is not a fluke, but is worthy of examination.

What was it about this programme in 2003, and indeed what is it now¹, that seemed to speak with such relevance and directness to its television audience? Why this text now?

What was it about this text that made it so successful, whilst other parenting programmes at the time commanded much smaller audiences and enjoyed a much shorter reign upon the schedules?

In this chapter, I am concerned to begin the unravelling of this moment of parenting culture at the very beginning of the twenty-first century; a moment in which children, 'twenty

¹ Although viewing figures for the programme waned with each series, as might be expected, the popularity of the programme has not disappeared and it is still able to command an audience of millions. The fifth season of *Supernanny* has, at the time of writing, begun its broadcast on another of the Channel 4 digital channels, E4.

percent of today but one hundred percent of the future' in the words of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, take centre-stage like never before in the battle against poverty, injustice and crime. In this moment, 'parenting', above all else and at times to the exclusion of all else, has been consistently (re)produced as 'the most' important factor in childrens' aspirations and in the erasure of problematic behaviour, which if unchecked is anticipated to become 'antisocial' behaviour. In addition, this moment of parenting culture is one in which the popularity of an entertainment programme featuring fifty minutes of badly behaved children and their weeping parents came to play a significant part in political speeches and policy announcements. In this chapter, I explore the specificities of 'parenting' and parenting culture; the gendered implications of this gender-neutral term, the rational, neo-liberalist approach to relationality that it implies, as well as the ways in which it might usefully take discussions of family into a tolerant, pragmatic and inclusive direction. I also point to ways in which we might theorise 'parenting' as marking an epistemic shift in terms of social justice and equality, particularly with regard to the enormous symbolic power that the idea of 'good parenting' has come to hold within debates around social mobility.

Supernanny and the cultural revolution

What is it about this particular programme that has made it such a success? I want to argue that this is not a fluke of programming, scheduling luck or absence of other competitor

programmes; nor that it can be explained simply as a sensationalist product that has succeeded in titillating viewers in a climate of trashy, melodramatic, voyeuristic reality and declining standards, as some have suggested (Glynn, 2000; Carey, 1995; Postman, 1986). Although these explanations represent important critiques of cultural texts, they tend to invoke a passive audience and often do not contextualise the social and cultural reasons why specific programmes flourish whilst others do not. They also reify rigid cultural hierarchies of value without examining how the theorist at the centre of such an exposition reproduces those values. I want to use a finer mesh in my examination of the specific language that *Supernanny* speaks in; and to link this language with the broader socio-political shifts around the power and place of parenting.

Each episode follows a family who have volunteered themselves for the interventions of the Supernanny, a woman called Jo Frost. In her career, Frost has provided childcare as a childminder and she also runs a parenting consultancy business where she 'troubleshoots' particular problems on a short-term basis with the families that employ her services. The programme promises to turn around the negative behavioural patterns that families have become embedded within, through interventions initiated by Frost, who spends two weeks with the families. The two weeks spent filming each family is edited down to a fifty minute episode.

The transformative story that unfolds within each episode follows a standard formula, with little narrative deviation in terms of where the action is located, how it is paced, its

accompanying soundtrack, order of events and modes of presentation. It is useful to think of this template as a storied sequence of narrative chapters, with each chapter contributing to the overall narrative of transformation. I first outline this narrative in general terms, and then discuss more widely how this narrative intersects with, and is emblematic of, 'the structure of feeling' around parenting that I have hitherto set out.

Introducing the family

In the first few minutes of the episode, the family is introduced via a kind of video portrait; they are filmed assembling or lining up together, usually in their garden or outside the front door of their home. As they assemble, children jostling one another, the camera closes in upon each family member's face, accompanied by the narrator naming and identifying their familial position. Parents are introduced first, then children, in descending order of age. This video portrait is rapidly intercut with dramatic domestic scenes that are loud, chaotic and often violent, and this entire sequence is lent an aura of intensity by the heavy rock soundtrack that accompanies it. The narration continues over this intercutting, describing the collective impact of the behaviour that we are witnessing, in references to 'mob rule', 'a gang of children', or a family 'ruled by his whims and constant tantrums'. This opening sequence, dramatic, titillating and arresting, also counterposes the public performance of portraiture and the associated visual motifs of calm, beautiful togetherness (signalled amusingly in many of these video portraits by parents standing firmly between warring siblings, smiling through gritted teeth) with the promise of exposing the more unpalatable

and chaotic intimate truths of family strife. In addition to the narration that accompanies the domestic drama, parents themselves offer their to-camera brief accounts of the family's problems, and narrate themselves as desperate, at breaking point and uncertain of what to do or who to turn to.

Enter Supernanny

The narrator reassures us that 'luckily, help is on its way', and the montage of domestic chaos subsides momentarily as the camera cuts to Jo Frost the Supernanny striding briskly along the street, through the neighbourhood, to the family home². The heavy rock soundtrack is replaced with a more whimsical march³. As she marches, the narrator outlines her experience, her history of troubleshooting or simply states 'enter Supernanny Jo Frost'. Before knocking upon the door, Frost stands in the street outside and states her parenting philosophy, in a script which barely deviates from one episode to the next: 'I believe that children need discipline/boundaries/routine/consistency'.

² The US version replaces this neighbourhood march with Jo Frost sitting in the back of a black London taxicab, watching these scenes on a laptop, intercut with her disapproving comments, open-mouthed shock and tutting.

³ The sonic sequence within the programme is an instructional place to begin explorations of the mood and tone of different points of the programme. Some specially-commissioned sonic motifs make their appearance in almost every episode, for example 'Nanny Walking' or 'Family Togetherness', and serve as significant narrative pegs and markers of sequences, whilst samples from existing pop songs vary from one episode to the next. Full details of the soundtrack sequences and audio clips that are used minute-by-minute are listed alongside episodes of the programme on the online archive.

The music gently ceases as Frost knocks on the front door. She is welcomed in, apparently for the first time, and introduces herself to the parents and then to the children one by one with a formal friendliness, shaking them by the hand and sometimes asking that they call her 'Jojo'. She tells the parents to go about their day as usual, and that she will 'just be observing', watching without comment. The comments do come, but at this stage in the episode they are silent and communicated only to the camera through a series of eye-rolls, tutting and outraged glances. The initial montage of high-drama is now extended and scenes of antagonism and conflict are shown in more detail, this time in Frost's presence. The narration at this stage lessens, and the scenes are left to 'speak for themselves'; or rather, Frost takes up the narration slack in hushed tones away from the family, or communicating through an exchange of looks with the camera.

The verdict

Frost delivers her verdict to the parents, alone. This segment of the episode is marked from the former scenes by its relative calm; the children are elsewhere, the parent(s) are composed, sitting and listening carefully and for the first time in the episode there is no accompanying music. Frost's tone during the verdict chapter of the episode shifts from invitation, understanding and composure to a climax of outraged astonishment, in which she seems to pick each word carefully in her struggle to convey the horror of what she has seen. She frequently begins her verdict by asserting that she has *never* seen anything like this. Every word is emphasized in a rising register of breathless, wide-eyed shock.

Invariably, one parent will begin to cry – in *all* cases it is the mother who cries first, and in *rare* episodes the father also cries. The camera closes in on the crying parent(s) and Frost's tone transforms from scolding reprimand to compassionate pledge to remedy the problems, sometimes accompanied by a reassuring hug.

Time to turn around

The parenting failure having been displayed and the parent(s) in question convinced anew of the expertise on offer, Supernanny gets mobilized. Accompanied now by a decisive voiceover and the same musical march, she returns to the house replete with her transformative arsenal; including a sheet detailing the new house rules, routine board and a reward display. Frost presents the rule board to the seated family via a freestanding flip-chart, which lends the process a managerial air and positions both parents and children as learners. She talks everyone through the routine board in a similar manner before affixing it in a central place in the house (often on the refrigerator). Frost then reveals, specifically to the children and with much fanfare, the reward display they will be using; these are always highly gendered (re)productions of the childrens' interests, so that three brothers are offered a 'football pitch' upon which they can earn 'goals' (Season 3, Episode 3), whilst three sisters are each given a 'flower' that they can earn 'petals' for (Season 2, Episode 6).

'With the new rules in place...'

Having introduced rules, routines and rewards, the narrative moves on to Frost shadowing parents as they implement the new regime. She demonstrates how and when they should use various strategies and techniques; standing next to them, taking them aside, or on occasion and when out in public spaces, via an earpiece. In each moment of disobedience or non-compliance, by parent or child, the technique is explained and demonstrated, invoking the profound importance of repetition and consistency⁴. She talks the parent 'through' the technique as they perform it, and if they struggle to use the right tone of voice or command the appropriate physical presence, she intervenes and inhabits their position by way of demonstration.

It is at this point in the episode that uncertainties and doubts are displayed, as well as successes, through video diary segments. Parent(s) speak of their frustration with the techniques, the difficulties they are encountering with the house rules and their exhaustion. These are frequently emotional.

"Less than impressed"

Having been enlightened, and having gradually implemented and apparently mastered the behavioural strategies, Frost herself leaves the family, whilst the camera remains to film

⁴ The techniques are unassailably branded as 'Supernanny techniques', developed through a slippery combination of experience and 'gut instinct', and promoted through the handbooks accompanying the series. 'Techniques' include the Involvement Technique, The Naughty Step Technique and the One-Strike-And-You're-Out Technique, as well as the Voice Of Authority and the Voice of Reason (these are all relentlessly capitalised in the accompanying books).

them struggle to maintain the changes she has instigated. Now without the reassurances of their expert to help maintain consistency and repetition, the parents begin to fail again; these failures are now narrated by voiceover. Frost watches surveillance footage of these families, punctuating what she sees with indignant outrage. She returns after this final week – the narrator announcing her return, usually stating that she is ‘less than impressed’ – armed with audiovisual evidence; footage of the house during her absence, shown either on a laptop or played via video on the television. In this second assessment, she debriefs the parents as to their successes and failures in her absence. The familiar montages of high-drama from the preceding chapter are replayed over the laptop; only this time we, the audience, are able to see both the parent(s)’ reactions to this undisputable proof of their failure, as well as Frost’s diagnosis. She pauses the replay frequently and turns to the parents in silence, waiting for a response before commenting.

Happy endings

The final segment of the episode concludes with the promised scene no-one thought possible – the family at a restaurant, a trouble-free journey to school, a calm visit to the supermarket – and a voiceover documenting the journey the family has been on. Frost triumphantly reiterates to camera how far the family has come and how proud she is of them. In the final farewell, the happy parents thank Frost for all her help, the now-delightful children promise to behave and Supernanny leaves the house.

Politicising parental skills

In 2003, a UN Committee on the Rights of the Child found that Britain was failing the standards and criteria set out with regard to the quality of life for the nation's children. In February 2007, A UNICEF report was published which examined the 'happiness and mental-wellbeing' of children and young people across the developed world. It found that children are more likely to suffer poverty and deprivation in the UK, worse relationships with their parents, and are exposed to more risks such as alcohol, drugs and unsafe sex, than their contemporaries in other developed nations, and placed Britain at the bottom of the ranks. Britain was 'officially' the worst place in the developed world to be a child.

The Children's Commissioner, Al Aynsley-Green, responded publicly to the findings, stating that they illustrated a 'crisis at the heart of our society' and launching '11Million', his rebranded five year plan for the Commission, the first year of which would devoted to health and happiness. The Government meanwhile dismissed UNICEF's findings as "historic" since the research was carried out before the 2004 Children's Act and therefore, presumably, the consequences and impact of the Act were unmeasured. Some commentators pointed out that the consequences of the Children's Act have not been as far-reaching as ministers have imagined, and that the UNICEF report, far from being 'historic',

is just one of a number of recently published reports, all significant and substantial and all making similar claims about the quality of life for British children (Brooks, 2007)⁵.

The terms in which 'happiness' and 'well-being' were evaluated in the UNICEF report deserve to be usefully deconstructed – particularly with regard to the self-report methodologies that were used – but what interests me here is the ways in which these findings speak to the culture of parenting that has been 'officialised' in the extensive family policy of New Labour. Since coming to power in 1997, New Labour has consistently placed families at the heart of its project of social renewal. In 1998, the Home Office published *Supporting Families*, which set out new Government proposals to tolerate and support a wider range of families than previous political administrations had. In this document, New Labour signalled its intentions to be different from administrations who had moralised or pathologised family forms falling outside of a two-parent, heterosexual ideal⁶. New Labour spoke specifically to the 'Back to Basics' Conservative campaign of the early 1990s, when the then-Prime Minister John Major launched something of a moral crusade against unmarried

⁵ This includes research from the Institute of Public Policy, the Nuffield Foundation and Save the Children

⁶ Although such moralising about family forms, structures and divisions of labour have continued to inform knowledge production about good childhoods from non-governmental agencies. Even more recently than the UNICEF report, the Children's Society published the findings of their report, *A Good Childhood* (2009) which suggested that the unhappiness of children was caused by the 'excessive individualism' of modernity, and specifically by working mothers. As might perhaps be expected, this seriously flawed report was critiqued more thoroughly by commentators than the previous UNICEF report, as antifeminist (Howze, 2009) extraordinarily reactionary (Bristow, 2009) insulting (Guldberg, 2009) and a matter of confounding variables (Finklestein, 2009).

mothers and urged the unhappily marrieds to remain married rather than divorce. In the words of the *Supporting Families* document:

“Neither a ‘back to basics’ fundamentalism, trying to turn back the clock, nor an ‘anything goes’ liberalism which denies the fact that how families behave affects us all, is credible anymore” (Home Office, 1998: 5).

New Labour’s reconfiguration of the place of parenting in modern society takes place within wider debates about the relationship between private and public spheres, the notion of active citizenship and how far government should intervene in family life.

The *Supporting Families* document is New Labour’s attempt to say something about the right way to parent, while (perhaps) sidestepping issues about who should be in a family or what families should look like; in short, *Supporting Families* ambitiously attempts to neither moralise about right and wrong family structures, nor support an ‘anything goes’ liberalism. Fiona Williams (2004) suggests that New Labour has increasingly addressed *parents* rather than *spouses*; that it is mothers and fathers, not husbands and wives, who are interpellated by family policy. In this parental address, New Labour has staked its interest in the *quality* of the parenting that parents do, and in whether they are satisfying the requirements of childrearing. As Williams states:

Parenthood began to be seen as something parents *do* rather than something they *are* (2004: 31)

The *Supporting Families* document has formed a backbone against which a range of policies and initiatives have since been introduced around the trope of the 'hardworking family', including an overhaul of the tax system and introduction of Working Families Tax Credits which 'top-up' family earnings, attempts to extend the range of childcare provision for working families and, more recently the restructuring of government Departments themselves and re-allocation of their respective duties and mandates. Most significantly, this involved the creation of an entirely new Department; the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Subsequent policy documents from across a range of departments have also cemented the centrality of parenting issues and concerns within the New Labour project, including *Every Child Matters* (2003) and the subsequent *Every Parent Matters* (2007). Parenting issues have also informed the ways in which paid employment has been addressed, with the Department of Trade and Industry setting out proposals to improve 'work-life balance' for parents (2003).

This enormous focus on parenting has been politically justified within the terms of mobility and meritocracy. Whilst New Labour has articulated its 'moral tolerance' with respect to the growing diversity of family forms, increasing numbers of lone parents, step-parents, queer families and so on, this articulation occurs alongside expressed concern about the so-called 'parenting deficit', a decline of family values and the impact of absent fathers (Barlow, Duncan and James, 2002). As Ben-Galim and Gambles (2008) point out, 'moral tolerance' and the *acknowledgement* of diversity exists within a wider concern about *some*

families, a continued (but muted) privileging of marriage, and a sound placing of disadvantage within the behaviours and lives of those families who, whilst *tolerated*, remain problematic. Diversity is 'fine', but marriage is 'best'. The terms of mobility infer that if the families who are most disadvantaged – those at the centre of the 'parenting deficit' – can be more adequately and intensively supported in their parenting skills, then the achievement gap, between the children of the wealthiest and those with the least wealth, will begin to close and that talent, not privilege, will begin to determine the future paths and successes of children. This New Labour philosophy locates social renewal tomorrow within early years interventions today; as the former Prime Minister Tony Blair stated in his 1999 Beveridge Lecture, 'we have made children our top priority because...they are 20% of the population but they are 100% of the future' (Walker, 1999).

In lots of ways, these public concerns about parents doing their parenting well are not new. Mothers have usually been held morally responsible for generating future citizens and reproducing the nation through care in ways that fathers are not. Concerns over the moral purity of women, and thus of the nation, have historically been inextricably bound up with concerns around the moral deficiency of the lower classes and are evident in discourses emerging in the 18th and 19th century. As Bev Skeggs (1997) demonstrates in her historical examination of the familial social policies of the time;

The concerns about the potentially polluting and dangerous working class were seen to be resolvable if mothers were educated to civilize, that is, to control and discipline themselves

and their husbands and sons who were likely to be the cause of anticipated problems. It is part of a process in which the mother acts as an invisible pedagogue. (1997: 43)

Mothers are central to the moral and civil health of the nation. The present vision of 'good parenting' has important roots in older discursive formations that established formal interventions into the practices of working-class women and mothers. Yet this specific moment of 'parenting culture' *does* signal an epistemic break and a modern reconfiguration, in terms of the degree and intensity to which these formations have stretched into the intimate sphere, in terms of the level of management and instruction around parenting practice and in terms of the intensity of anxiety and doubt which pervades the everyday world of childrearing. 'Parenting' is being re-imagined, and literally rewritten in policy documents, as a set of hundreds of universal skills that can be taught – indeed that *must* be taught – in order for social renewal to happen.

'Parenting', not mothering

The discursive shift away from talk of 'childrearing' – the everyday practices, habits, behaviours and activity associated with raising and caring for children – to talk of 'parenting' is not straightforward, and requires unravelling. 'Parenting' is a newer, neo-liberal term that endeavours to replace 'mothering'. The preference for 'parenting' is partly a response to feminism and to feminist deconstructions of the essentialising and totalising gender effects of the term 'mother' (Williams, 2004). 'Mothering' forecloses the

possibility that men too might do 'mothering' work or that men and women might co-parent equally (Segal, 1997) and the shift to 'parenting' in some ways reflects the demands and expectations that the labour of childrearing involve both mothers *and* fathers.

The shift to the term 'parent' also speaks to the emergence and growing numbers of alternative and queer families, for whom the terms 'mother' and indeed 'father' may be experienced as inadequate descriptions of the complexity of family structure and identities contained within their 'families of choice' (Weeks, Donovan and Heaphy, 2000). The term 'parent' holds the productive possibilities for a range of familial identities and relational labels that are neither bound by reproductive claims nor presumptive of heterosexuality, such as 'lesbian co-parent' or 'donor dad' (Dunne, 1999, 2000; Ryan-Flood, 2009). As such, the term 'parent' can be a liberatory strategy or a queer undermining of the heterosexist assumptions around who counts as a parent or who can be considered a family. Finally, the term 'parent' loosens identity from biology and makes welcome space for those who are engaged in childrearing and responsible for children without necessarily having a biological connection to those children – foster carers, adoptive parents, guardians – and would prefer to evade the terms of mother and father and the connotations they hold within them. As noted already, parenting is increasingly discussed in terms of *doing* rather than *being*; the actions and procedures of childrearing rather than an ontological category (Williams, 2004). In her work exploring the opening up of familial possibility across the latter part of the twentieth century, Fiona Williams is concerned with charting the modern disaggregation, or 'uncoupling', of the four key sequential elements in normative

heterosexual life (marriage, living together, sex and parenthood) and in her research, the discursive shift towards genderless and inclusive 'parenting' is an integral part of this uncoupling.

I want to hold onto the productive possibilities and opportunities that are opened up by the shift to the term 'parenting' and to recognise the very real work that it does for families who challenge heterosexist, rigidly gendered and biological assumptions around childrearing. Without pouring cold water on these productive opportunities, I would however like also to think through the more problematic consequences of the shift to 'parenting'; principally the ways in which it formalises and operationalises the relationality between parents and children as a set of skills and competencies, and also the obscuring and individualising of gender relations that it does. There are two distinct – but intertwined – sets of issues within the preference for 'parenting' then; what is done by the gender neutral language, and what is done by the shift from 'parent' as ontological category to 'parent' as verb.

The mother as invisible pedagogue and as figure of moral order within the home continues to haunt the fantasies of even genderless parenting. The potency of this fantasy is revealing; just as feminists have challenged the significance of unbroken maternal care, the historically specific mother/child dyad has re-emerged as providing the 'best' early years care system (Rose, 1999). Gavin Miller (2009) has pointed out that right across the parenting policy of New Labour, prolonged attention has been paid to the work of attachment theorists such as

John Bowlby, who argued that anything less than unbroken, intensive *maternal* care damaged children for the rest of their lives. The parent at the centre of 'good parenting' is resolutely female.

The social investment state; from childrearing to 'parenting'

What we say about children and childhood is not altogether about children and childhood

(Hillman, 1975: 8, quoted in Jenks, 1996: 8)

What is the job of the parent? What functions and purposes should parenting fulfill? What does successful childrearing look like? The terrain of childrearing, and the practices, obligations and responsibilities that are promoted and assumed of it, has undergone a number of discursive shifts. The child, who in the nineteenth century was considered an inconvenient nuisance best ignored (Badinter, 1980), began to be reconceived at the turn of the twentieth as less a burden, more an object for philanthropic interventions and a symbol for the need for urban reform (Ross, 1993). Still later, notions of what the responsibilities towards the child might be shift from questions of survival to questions of cultivation; from how the child might survive the present to how it might be guaranteed a future.

In his archaeology of discourses around childhood, Chris Jenks (1996) points out that across all its incarnations, mythologies and articulations – the savage child, the natural child, the social child, the angelic, the wilful and so on – the category of ‘the child’ continues to arouse basic ontological questions for sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists. Far from being a real category that can be examined and known, ‘the child’ in Jenks’ historical analysis is an ideological symbol, an object for the display of difference, a psychoanalytic category for the unearthing of motives, a personification of a part of the psyche, and a way of routinising theories of maturation and development. In short, the category of ‘the child’ tells us far more about adults than it ever will about children. Jenks argues that the ways in which children are treated is illustrative of social structure, of the achievement of civilisation and of the strategies through which power and constraint are exercised. In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that the Government were so keen to quickly dismiss the damning findings of the UNICEF report (discussed at the beginning of this chapter) as ‘historic’.

Taking our cue from Jenks, we might reasonably ask what the political pledge to ‘end child poverty by 2020’ can tell us about the ways in which ‘the child’ is newly enmeshed within commitments to equality and inequality. This pledge, initially made by New Labour in 1997, and subsequently committed to by all major parties, forms an important cornerstone of contemporary welfare policy rhetoric, despite mounting evidence that the interim targets

have not been reached and the pledge overall is unlikely to be fulfilled⁷. Ruth Lister (2006) points out that children have been firmly placed at the centre of the 'social investment state' like never before, but that we should give this placement only 'two cheers' at best. In her astute analysis, 'the child' has become something of a symbolic fetish; the 'specific needs' of one vulnerable group (in this case, children) preventing a more thorough examination of structural disadvantages. In particular, the separation, and fetishisation, of the poverty of children from the poverty of the adults in their families has been remarked upon by the Women's Budget Group (WBG), as evidence of the dislocation of child welfare from its gendered context. Noting that child poverty is disproportionately linked to the poverty of lone mothers, the WBG has asked why child and maternal poverty is separated and what this does. As Lister phrases it, this disjointed and decontextualised approach to child poverty means that it is "children (but not women) first" in New Labour welfare policy; that the impoverished mothers of disadvantaged children recede into the background. 'The child' continues to perform a symbolic role in visions of social renewal, even if in a broader sense the structural disadvantages of their families and the contexts in which their poverty is lived are not spoken to with the same urgency, or indeed at all.

The shift to the term 'parenting' is, I would argue, an integral part of a reconfiguration of (in)equality. The transformations within the Labour Party in the 1990s, particularly its

⁷ The New Labour 2010 target of halving child poverty will, according to indicators, not be met. In 2008, the Commons Select Committee on Work and Pensions, headed by Terry Rooney, reported that a combination of ineffectual tax credits, welfare benefits increases in line with inflation rather than with earnings, and a lack of affordable childcare, was responsible for an estimated 2.8 million children continuing to live in poverty.

rebranding as New Labour and embrace of a 'Third Way' political vision (Giddens, 1998) have been narrativised as part of a wider 'modernisation' process necessary for political survival; as in the phrase 'traditional values in a modern setting'. The particularities of New Labour political discourse have been well-documented (Fairclough, 2000; Seldon, 2001) in terms of the shifting intentions and promises of the party, and of how social justice and equality were becoming reconfigured in problematic ways. Promises of jobs became replaced with promises of *opportunities*, redistributions of wealth are replaced by redistribution of *aspirations*, and the 'unemployed' were rebranded as the more dynamic-sounding 'jobseeker' (Fairclough, 2000). The most significant of these language shifts has been the rapid uptake of the term 'social inclusion', which locates the problems of disadvantage firmly within the lives of a stubborn and persistent work-shy minority or 'underclass' (Murray, 1990); criminal, welfare-dependent, morally lax and promiscuous. The idea of the 'underclass' has a historical place within Margaret Thatcher's era of politics, yet it has found a particular salience within New Labour policy. While Thatcherism sought to create a common enemy of the underclass, Blairism sought to include them through incubating their aspiration; though both have preferred moral rather than economic solutions. The cultural disgust directed at a recent fantasy of this underclass, the 'chav', demonstrates the ways in which accountability for disadvantage has moved from structure and class towards individual behaviour and lifestyle (Tyler, 2008). This is a theme that recurs across the textual and interview data; in Chapter 8, I explore how encounters with *Supernanny* reproduced and rehearsed particular kinds of cultural disgust.

Underpinning these language shifts are changing explanations around the reasons behind inequality and strategies to address them. Ruth Levitas (2005) suggests that there are three principle discourses for explaining what causes inequality and what might solve it. Briefly, *redistributionist* discourse sees the concentration of wealth as producing inequality and seeks to redistribute wealth; *social integrationist* discourse holds unemployment accountable and proposes employment as the solution; and *moral underclass* discourse points the finger towards a culture of dependency and a lack of moral values within the lives of the excluded themselves and recommends cultural training. Levitas argues that government policy around the solutions to inequality have undergone a profound shift, moving away from a combination of 'redistributionist' and 'social integrationist' discourses – wealth and jobs – and moving towards a combination of 'social integrationist' and 'moral underclass' – jobs and culture – and that this has transformed the very terrain of renewal itself. The repetition of causality within individual lives, as opposed to structural inequality, contexts and environments has a particular potency with regards to parents who 'simply don't care', who 'cannot or will not control their children' (Field, 2003: 84). Burman (1997) points to the absence of social and political context within the discipline of developmental psychology, which promises solutions for the 'universal individual'

Instead of poverty, unemployment and frustration, we have evil children, bad mothers and broken homes (1997: 142 cited in Holt, 2009: 207)

These political shifts around renewal, inclusion and governance have been neo-liberal in character, associated with the rise of the market, economic deregulation, privatisation and the replacement of notions of the 'public good' with notions of 'individual responsibility'. In his work around crime control and policy, David Garland (2001) demonstrates how welfarist, rehabilitationist strategies around crime have rapidly ceded towards punitive, retributionist strategies. These new policies, Garland argues, have in turn cemented shifts around cultural sensibilities, specifically towards 'responsibilisation', a neoliberal sensibility that is less oriented towards humanist interventions than towards moral, punitive, expressive condemnations and retributive justice. The citizen in the responsibilisation milieu is not merely a subject with social rights, but rather is a subject whose rights are conditionally bound up with certain responsibilities. This move towards responsibilisation and towards reframing collective problems within individualized terms can be seen clearly in the recent phrasing of future welfare reform as 'personalised conditionality' (Greggs, 2008). In this example, the problem of unemployment is reconfigured around the issue of individual work 'readiness', rather than, for example, the availability of work. Peter Squires (2009) has suggested that the responsibilisation strategy is an incredibly far-reaching and broad project, encompassing "civic renewal, economic regeneration, personal morality, new forms of governing and the elimination of criminal and public nuisances" (2009:11). Garland, Squires and many others have pointed to the inconsistencies in this 'rebalancing' of rights and responsibilities, in which it is the individual upon whom interventionist legislation acts, whilst the structural, contextual and environmental factors in which the

individual acts, lives and is constrained by remain untouched (Stephen and Squires, 2003; Hodgkinson and Tilley, 2007).

The responsibilisation strategy is intimately tied up with changes in the ways that parents are addressed by government. Parents are framed as 'partners' with the state, with voluntary and business sectors (Williams, 2004) and it is through this partnership that children shall be prepared or 'parented'. Addressing parents as 'partners' presupposes interesting claims around agency and power – 'encouragement' or 'support', we should remember, can very quickly become enforcement, cajoling, coercion or compulsion (Macleod, 2004), particularly in light of the broad range of enforcement strategies around parenting that have been introduced since 2000, such as Parenting Orders and Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (Holt, 2009). In addition, should parents be deemed to have failed to satisfy the requirements of such orders and contracts, their continued receipt of welfare benefits and payments are in jeopardy, lending a profoundly punitive air to these 'supportive' methods. Attaching such conditions undermines the principles of the welfare state itself. Parents must satisfy the responsibility tests of citizenship as defined by the Government – financial autonomy, parental responsibility, cohesion and moral guardianship – and it is intimated that the breakdown of 'social fabric' can be directly attributed to irresponsibility on the part of parents (Home Office, 2003; Halpern 2004).

'The parenting deficit' and transformations in the family

As I explored in Chapter 1, from the late nineteenth century, parenting experts, advisors and gurus, armed with first medical and clinical experience, and then later psychiatric and therapeutic knowledges, set about making their respective cases for a system of childrearing practices that would guarantee not only a healthy, disease-free and nourished child, but a child who was in addition, variously and according to the context, mindful, respectful, resilient, autonomous and civically minded, with an inquiring mind and an enterprising spirit (Hulbert, 2003). There is a greater acknowledgement within policy of the diverse family circumstances in which the child may live today, but the trade-off for this acknowledgement (or as I have suggested pragmatic tolerance) of diversity is the casting of 'the family' as in crisis, in flux, in decline or going through a state of moral ambivalence.

This narration of 'the family in crisis' takes on different textures and explanations, solutions and causes vary. For some writers and theorists, it is late capitalism and the extension of consumption and consumerism into the hallowed space of childhood; creating 'toxic', technologised childhoods that have undermined quality family time (Palmer, 2008). Others have blamed the rise of mothers working outside the home and the failure of fathers to fill the domestic space left; the so-called 'time famine' of modern parenting or the 'contradiction of emotional emptiness in the midst of plenty' (Baker, 2000). What these narrations share is a rosy nostalgia for a 'golden age' of family (Coontz, 1992) harking to one or several signifiers of family happiness which is felt to now be absent; when fathers

were breadwinner and mothers were domestically and unfailingly present, when children were seen and not heard, when technology stopped at the threshold, when thrift and economy ruled. This golden age is usually considered to have fallen somewhere between the authoritarian Victorians and post-war 'anything-goes' liberalism (Squires, 2008:20) and this age is considered to have been newly affluent, morally confident, and bound together by a social fabric now considered torn. As the earlier quote from *Supporting Families* document illustrates, 'anything goes' liberalism in the family is often considered just as damaging for children as authoritarianism. The moral laxity, excessive freedoms and lack of clear boundaries that are associated, rightly or wrongly, with family liberalism are held to have caused the 'current crisis' of parenting. Much of the anti-social behaviour strategies that have emerged in the past decade explicitly address the lack of 'respect' that children and young people are said to have for parents, teachers and members of the community – and indeed it was the Respect Task Force (established in 2005) that emerged from this legislation and was charged with effecting a cultural change around civility.

Doubtless, the institution of the family *has* undergone profound transformations – though we must also remember that family diversity itself is not new or peculiarly modern, rather it is the acknowledgement of diversity that is new (Williams, 2004). One of the most significant familial transformations concerns not family form, but the hierarchy of value within it; the dismantling of the privilege of the father and the rise of spousal equality, as well as the erosion of generational hierarchies, so that children and parents are considered to be equal members of a family. The social historian Hugh Cunningham (2005) suggests

that in the middle of the twentieth century, these hierarchical transformations have gone even further than parent/child equality. As children stop contributing to the household income, and assume rights as children, parental authority is eroded and the emotional power of the family passes from parents to children, in what he calls a “sacralisation of childhood”. Although other historians have argued that the rise of the ‘child-king’ began much earlier, at least for wealthier classes (Badinter, 1980), Cunningham insists that this sacralisation of children could only take a more populist grip once children had been loosened from the financial obligations of the family. This loosening occurred in the early twentieth century through the universal provision of education together with the legal compulsion to attend. One of the more obvious illustrations of these transformations of the domestic pecking order comes from Wilmott and Young’s classic 1957 study of family life in the East End of London; Mrs Glass, talking about mealtimes and food, insisted that the extra meat chop would go onto the plate of the hardworking father, Mr Glass.

Cunningham argues that now, any extra chop would be more likely to go to the children.

This sacralisation does not appear to be the preserve of the wealthier classes, but endemic and normative across many different kinds of family. A British Social Attitudes survey in 2008 found that 42% - almost half – of respondents agreed with the statement “the relationship between parent and child is stronger than the relationship between any couple”.

When the novelist Ayelet Waldman announced in a 2005 *New York Times* column that she loves her husband more than her children, she wryly points out too that this is not an

‘acceptable’ thing for a mother to say and imagines how outraged her mother acquaintances would be if they knew this.

The social transformations within the family – the rise of mothers working outside the home, the geographical mobility of the mobile nuclear family and the breakdown of extended family and communities – become the very reasons why parenting classes and parenting education has become so necessary. In this way, the philosophy of New Labour fits closely with that of the communitarian philosophers, particularly Etzioni (1995), for whom the family within the local neighbourhood is the significant force for social renewal. The modern family within this communitarian philosophy, newly unshackled from community ties which in the past guaranteed social order and morality (evidenced by examples such as the decline of religious affiliations and community groups) and increasingly living in isolation from older generations and the extended family, requires new forms of parenting support, education and training from governmentally funded and run organisations. Within communitarian philosophy, the unmooring of families from their communities means that the sacred child is in danger of becoming an ‘indulged child’, a child who is morally directionless and whose mobile parents have become permissive. ‘Anything goes liberalism’ thus becomes the constitutive other of communitarianism.

The positioning of parental deficit within community decline and changes in the extended family thus emerges as another productive space for negotiating parental intervention. Parents need more advice and more interventions by this logic, because they are isolated

from *their* parents, the grandparents who would have taught the parenting skills to the next generation of childrears. In 2006 the former national chair of the Professional Association of Teachers called for compulsory parenting classes for all fourteen to sixteen year olds, which would include instruction around manners, road safety and what constitutes 'acceptable' behaviour. This parenting education, claimed the chair, is essential because of geographical mobility and the decline of the extended family⁸. The 'parenting deficit' must, in these accounts, be compensated for through civil re-education and through nothing less than a cultural revolution in matters of social morality and responsibility, concentrated upon the symbolically powerful trope of the 'hardworking family' and assisted by experts and parenting practitioners rather than grandparents and neighbours. Clarke and Newman (2004) suggest that by creating its own conditions for inclusion and exclusion, New Labour is marked by a 'thin multiculturalism'. This thin multiculturalism, rather than engaging meaningfully with family diversity, requires that all families perform in standardised ways in order to satisfy 'responsibility tests', even when these tests are contradictory (such as for example, lone parents who often cannot be both economically sufficient *and* intensively 'present', see Duncan and Edwards, 1999):

The possibilities for pursuing an equalities agenda with a commitment to a diverse society and reducing inequalities have been co-opted to a much shallower concern with social

⁸ 'Pupils 'must learn about nappies', BBC news. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/5223768.stm>

inclusion, centred on the imagery of a nation of hard-working families. (Clarke and Newman 2004: 63)

For Clarke and Newman, and others, a genuine equalities agenda around the family would endeavour to minimise or even remove structural obstacles for families that do not fit narrow family norms. New Labour's concerns to effect 'social inclusion' for citizens, and families, that they define as 'excluded' sidesteps these obstacles, or rather, prefigures such obstacles as emanating from within the diversity of those families themselves. Whilst the debates around socially excluded families in the UK have come to be principally around 'parenting skills', in the United States they have focused largely upon 'absent fathers' as the cause of this social exclusion – though of course these parallel discussions have informed one another in important ways.

As well as transformations in family structure, parenting culture also demonstrates shifts in the discursive meanings of 'the child'. This is supported by the historian Chris Jenks, whose reading of childhood through a Foucaultian lens (1996) suggests that cultural ideas about childhood – and consequently for my analysis, parenthood – circulate between two competing mythological images of children; the Dionysian, wilful, headstrong and stubborn child who requires strict moral guidance and the Apollonian child with his innate capacity for reason, who requires facilitation and encouragement. I explore the circulation of these mythological ideas across textual and social fields and the ways in which parents use and reproduce them in more detail in Chapter 7, but for now it is worth gesturing to the ways

in which the emergence of the Apollonian mythology coincides with the emergence and intensification of notions of the family as a self-contained, all-determining unit of parental causality:

The modern family has become the basic unit of social cohesion in advancing capitalism; the very epitome of the rational enterprise. Families are cellular, mobile, manageable and accessible to emergent forms of mass communication, unlike the extended families that preceded them. (Jenks, 1996: 100)

To understand the anxieties that are replayed around 'the modern family' is to tease out both the political and cultural discourses around parenting. There is a very particular story of 'the family' being repeated across these sites of policy and culture. Richenda Gambles (forthcoming) suggests that by exploring these repetitions and negotiations around families and what they do, social theorists can develop a sense of a 'structure of feeling' around parenting. Gambles suggests that throughout New Labour policy documents there is a discernable thread of sensibilities related to parenting. Drawing on the sociologist Raymond Williams' (1961) concept of a 'structure of feeling' – a mood, an atmosphere or an interaction between official consciousness and lived experience – she suggests that an 'official consciousness' can be gleaned from recent family policy relating to parenting, albeit a fragmentary and sometimes contradictory one. This structure of feeling seeks to privilege both intensive, 'hands-on' parenting *and* parental employment, creating a conundrum for single parents and silently marking the 'obvious' desirability of married, stable parents

(even as ministers emphatically insists that they will inclusively tolerate diverse family forms).

Gender roles and the re-nuclearised family

The narrative of transformation offered up by *Supernanny* intersects with the sensibilities of neoliberal parenting culture as set out here. The promises of the programme are absolutely centred upon changing the parenting practices and behaviours of the parents in ways that echo the current forms of parenting support, which are individualist and moralistic rather than sociological and economic.

First, what kinds of parents does the programme help? The promotional material for the programme appears to call to any and all parents that are struggling with the demands of contemporary parenting, in reassuring tones that these difficulties are normal and the advice that will be offered can be universally applied and indeed is universally desired. 'Wouldn't it be nice', one online episode tag asks, 'if we all had a superhero on hand to guide us through family?' Yet the diversity of families on the programme itself is somewhat narrow.

The *Supernanny* crew do visit families headed up by a single parent – although, being fastidious, we should note that the number of these episodes is not proportional to national

figures and single parent families are overrepresented in the programme⁹. In other episodes, the family on screen is complex in terms of step-parents, remarriage, half and step-siblings, though again this is not proportional. In terms of ethnicity, the *Supernanny* families are particularly white. One bi-racial family (Season 2, Episode 3) has been included, but to date there have been no black participants. In her discussion of another makeover programme, *What Not To Wear*, Angela McRobbie (2004) notices a similar hyper-whiteness to participants and suggests that if the kind of cruelty and humiliation that is routinely visited upon working-class subjects were visited upon ethnic minority subjects, the programme would likely be interpreted as racist. The whiteness of *Supernanny* speaks to a range of significant issues; the new acceptability of classed cruelty and the ways it has supplanted racism; the racialising of the 'underclass' and even the 'working-class' as white rather than multi-racial; the misguided separation of issues of class and race equality rather than the threading together of both (see Runnymede Trust, 2009 for an excellent collection of essays on these topics). Similarly, no episode has included a gay, lesbian or queer family, families with more than two parents or families living communally. *Supernanny*, for all it appears to speak to *all* families, is marked by the same 'thin multiculturalism' that has characterised New Labour's family support strategies.

By extension, the gendered parenting roles that are re-presented in the programme are equally narrow. Whether two-parent, single parent, or step-parent, the featured families

⁹ The 2003 Census found that of the 7.3 million families with parents of working age in the UK, 1.9 million of these are lone parent families.

are overwhelmingly traditional in terms of the division of labour. The partnered mother is also the one who takes up the bulk of the childcare; it is she who 'needs' Frost's visit and who receives the attentions of the makeover, although fathers too are required to be part of the episode (somewhat tokenistically, as I discuss in the next chapter). The paid work that partnered women in the episodes do is incidental to the childrearing labour that falls unequally upon them. At the end of one viewing session with my research participants (see Chapter 7 for a fuller discussion), it became clear that none of them had realised that the featured mother was employed full-time alongside her family responsibilities, although they could all correctly identify the father's career. The maternal employment of featured families (where it does exist) is not narratively centred or expected as paternal employment is; and where it does exist, it is problematised. Meanwhile, single parents (or rather, mothers, since the programme has yet to feature a single father) who make it onto the screen also perform prescriptive gendered roles and are rarely employed outside the home.

The programme thus panders to, and reproduces, broader gendered expectations around parenting; that the key to good parenting is the mother-child relationship, and that it is mothering that guarantees the correct social, moral and emotional development (Gerhardt, 2005). Particularly with regards to teaching children good manners, good behaviour and self-regulation, it reproduces expectations that it is the mother who (re)produces the self (Lawler, 2000). Importantly, the family members who are defined as needing help are resoundingly nuclear; mothers and fathers are the only adults included in these makeovers. Whilst this might seem an obvious and self-evident 'fact' – that it is only the parents of a

child who would require the parenting support of a television Supernanny – we need to remember that the labour of ‘parenting’ and childcare is often shared beyond parents, who may include extended family or friends. Indeed, the word ‘parent’ becomes a misnomer in many families, where other adults are involved, sometimes intensively, with childrearing. As Ciara Doyle has argued in her work on the programme *Families in Crisis* (a programme produced and broadcast in Ireland which is thematically similar to *Supernanny*), the nuclear family becomes a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ in television programmes such as these¹⁰. This prophecy is sometimes achievable only through a great degree of work by both camera crew and production edit. For example, Doyle points to one episode of *Families in Crisis* in which there is a deliberate erasure through careful camera (non)framing of a man whose voice can be heard in the background but who we do not see; he is an uncle, the mother’s brother, involved in his nieces and nephews upbringing but not visually acknowledged.

Similar examples of this ‘re-nuclearising’ of families which are not straightforwardly nuclear can be found in *Supernanny*. In the first season, Kelly’s mother does a good deal of the childrearing of her grandchildren, minding them several times a week. She is not part of the parenting makeover however, and is invited to speak to camera *only* to comment positively upon the changes in her daughter Kelly’s mothering (Season One, Episode Three). In another, mother Debbie’s parents, who live next door and are also heavily involved in the childrearing of their three granddaughters, are symbolically excluded from

¹⁰ Ciara Doyle presented this research in a 2009 conference paper titled ‘The nuclear family as self-fulfilling prophecy: representations of kin in TV parenting programmes’, summary available online at <http://www.parentingculturestudies.org/seminar-series/seminar1/summary.html>

the nuclear family with the Supernanny's decision to provide and fit a padlock to their garden gate. This is justified through the language of 'giving them back their space', but the therapeutic promises of nuclear autonomy for both parties is scarce comfort for Debbie and her children. Discussing the creative possibilities for redrawing boundaries of care and intimacy are foreclosed by the rationale of the locked gate, the clear boundary markings of separate households (Season Two, Episode 6).

Contractual language and parenting skills – 'tough on bad children, tough on the causes of bad children'

The vocabulary employed within the programme has clear echoes with the cultural revolution that has been initiated around anti-social behaviour. The 'tough love' rhetoric employed by Frost resonates with the pledges around anti-social behaviour made by the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, particularly in his second term of office, which gathered momentum upon his third election win. In the first of his monthly media conferences held after this win, Blair stated that the deep-seated causes of nuisance behaviour were 'to do with family life in the way that parents regard their responsibility to their children, in the way that some kids grow up generation to generation without proper parenting, without a proper sense of discipline within the family'. Pledges to 'get tough' and take 'tougher action' on the behaviour of children and teenagers he described variously in 2005 as

'menace children', 'yobs' and 'dysfunctional'¹¹ translates uncomfortably into the language of respect and mutual civility envisaged by the Respect task force. As Richard Sennett (2004) notes, if respect is not given in both directions, including from institutions towards the most vulnerable individuals in society, the result is asymmetric citizenship. The 'respect' that the government requires is only conditionally and partially available to the children and young people who are narrated as the problem. The willingness of local councils and police forces to criminalize children and young people and to use contentious liberty-restricting devices to disperse them from public places has been well-documented by civil liberty and children's groups¹². Nonetheless, and even in this climate of unequal respect, the solution is more 'toughness', more punitive measures:

There is not going to be a solution unless we are sufficiently hard-headed to say that from a very early age we need a system of intervention.

(Tony Blair in interview with Mark Easton, BBC, 30.08.05)

The Respect Task Force was launched in 2006, and headed by the former lead of the anti-social behaviour unit Louise Casey, who too centralized bad parenting as the principle cause

¹¹ Tony Blair sets out the objectives of the Respect Task Force particularly clearly in a BBC interview with Mark Easton in August 2005.

¹² Two particular technologies have been employed to date in this dispersal, the Mosquito and the so-called 'Acne Light'. The first emits a high-frequency buzzing sound that causes sonic distress and cannot be heard by people aged over twenty-five, whilst the second bathes an area in the same kind of pink light used by dermatologists to show skin problems. This presumably is to embarrass teenagers from gathering in an area. For a discussion of the civil liberties questions these raise see <http://www.liberty-human-rights.org.uk/issues/young-peoples-rights/stamp-out-the-mosquito.shtml>

of incivility. In a twin drive against 'bad parenting' and anti-social behaviour, Casey championed the ASBO and the Parenting Order. The effect of this twin drive has been the coupling of these two problems as always and already linked in an unbreakable partnership of causality. Casey publicly championed *Supernanny* as a programme in several interviews in 2006, interpreting the popularity of the programme as evidence of a public hunger for more government-sponsored and delivered parenting advice. I discuss this threading of the programme's popularity within policy in more detail in Chapter 9.

The career trajectory of Jo Frost herself is instructive too of the kinds of 'support' that New Labour offers to families. Her experience as a childminder is referred to by the voiceover upon her screen entrance, and it is this experience which validates her capacity to act as a television parenting expert. She embodies exactly the 'parenting practitioner' whose work is now funded through the National Association of Parenting Practitioners. This army of professionals whose purpose is to train parents how to parent certainly shifts attention from what is a more pressing concern for many parents of locating quality, affordable childcare. Although the issue of childcare provision has risen in public agendas in recent years (Penn, 2007), its uneven availability and varying costs in different parts of the country mean that it continues to act as a scarce resource preventing some women from re-entering the labour force. Recent evidence suggests that the employment 'motherhood penalty' – the loss in earnings, promotions and progressive deskilling that accumulates for every year a mother is out of the workforce raising children - is significantly contributed to by lack of appropriate childcare (Correll and Barnard, 2005; Fawcett Society, 2009). For women who do return

to work, the Tax Credit system which is supposed to cover a portion of childcare costs for the less well-off has proved confusing, complex to calculate and sometimes inefficient (Braun, 2006). The type of childcare provision – private or state and voluntary sector – has become another site of social class division, with middle-class families able to afford and access private care, whilst working-class families have less choice (Ball et al, 1995; Hays, 2003) The proportion of childcare costs that parents are to pay remains higher in the UK than the European average; between seventy-five to eighty per cent (Vincent, Braun and Ball, 2008). In 2007, the Daycare Trust published a report which found that the free, universal childcare promised to every pre-school child was neither free nor universal. A quarter of parents reported paying fees for their child's 'part-time early years education', whilst others reported paying up to one hundred pounds a term for 'extras'. Significantly, the Daycare Trust also found serious inequalities in access, with poorer families and migrant families much less likely to find and take up nursery places for their children (Daycare Trust, 2007).

These issues around childcare do not make an appearance within episodes however, and the capacity in which Frost appears and attends – as a parenting practitioner or trainer, not as a childminder – echoes the ways in which the extension of childcare provision has become less of a priority than the promotion of 'good parenting practice'. In both the *Supporting Parents* document of 1998 and in a 2004 DfES paper, *Choice for Parents; the best start for children*, the importance of parental choice about childcare is underscored and New Labour signalled its commitment to provide a childcare place for every three-year old child.

However, the state provision of childcare, through community nurseries, the extension of nursery care in primary schools and as part of some Sure Start centres, rarely delivers this choice, with limited hours of care available. Frequently the only 'choice' for parents is between morning or afternoon attendance. The scarcity of childcare emerges only as an incidental issue in some episodes – and when it emerges, it is to emphasize that it is through better *parenting*, not better childcare *provision*, that this scarcity can be resolved. One mother, who is struggling to work from home as a telephone operator whilst also caring for her three children, is advised by Frost how to better divide her attentions between children and work (Season 2, Episode 5). The issue becomes *management* of a lack of childcare, not the lack of childcare itself. In another episode, son Cameron is in imminent danger of losing his nursery place, yet the issues this raises of inadequate support for children at risk of exclusion is sidestepped in the focus upon the inadequacies of his parents' parenting (Season 4, Episode 1).

The success of *Supernanny*, I have aimed to demonstrate in this chapter, is no accident of scheduling. Rather, the programme's philosophy has been absolutely a product of the parenting culture within which it is anchored, and this has guaranteed it a solid share of the television market, even during these fragmented and digitalized times. Whilst some of the more pessimistic media theorists whose work I explored in Chapter 2 would perhaps dismiss the programme's commercial success as a sign of the sensationalist voyeurism it invites, I think we need to be more cautious. *Supernanny* is not an aberration or distortion of parenting culture and politics, but a reflection and reconfiguration of it. The 'tough-

love' methods espoused by Frost are in comfortable symbiosis with the cultural pendulum shift towards boundaries, discipline and authority and the narration of a crisis of adult authority. The transformation effected in each episode resonates with the ways in which 'poor parenting' has been taken up politically as the principle cause of social immobility, the poverty of aspiration and achievement. If we can just crack this discipline issue, things can only get better. Both in the programme and in political sphere, this kind of narration requires an enormous amount of optimistic editing. Specifically, the sort of popular pedagogies of the programme and the cultural training offered up through the course of the narrative have a neat synergy with the kind of individualized solutions that the neoliberal state is prepared to offer its subjects. Both the problems and solutions to parenting issues have come to be framed in particularly psychological terms, and it is to these psychological terms that I turn to in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – psychologising parenting

In February 2009, *Psychologies* magazine carried a four-page feature entitled 'Be Your Child's Emotional Coach', which advised parents on how to teach their children to categorise their feelings, manage their emotions and become 'expressive', 'well-adjusted' adults. Stephen Briers, who both writes the article and uses it to promote his book *Superpowers for Parents* (2009), refers to the cultivation of 'emotional literacy' or 'emotional intelligence'. Briers suggests that parents need to introduce vocabularies for emotions to their children in much the same way as they do for colours, shapes and everyday objects, and warns that failure to do so has profound effects on the future person they will become. In the same month, the Children's Society published *A Good Childhood*, its report into the happiness and mental health of British children. The report suggested that children's lives have become much more difficult and complex, that children are plagued by low self-esteem and that individualism and consumerism is damaging their mental health.

Debates around parenting, which change the term 'parent' itself away from a category of being and towards a verb, are constructed in these instances as debates around how to create and guarantee psychological wellbeing and mental health for children. Decisions about how to best 'parent' one's children are made within a cultural imagination that is principally therapeutic, not sociological (Furedi, 2004). This therapeutic culture speaks in a language of emotions and feelings, rather than of power and justice. Ouellette and Hay

argue that it promises to accomplish self-esteem, 'not only for the benefit of individuals, but for the society's in which they exist as burden' (2008: 67). And indeed, it exhorts us, the therapeutic subjects, to speak in this language; to speak endlessly of our problems and troubles. By sharing our pain, we can heal ourselves. What is missing from this equation is a sense of the history of emotions, and of the ways in which emotional concepts are put to different kinds of work across place, space and time; far from being coherent, emotional literacy for example has a conceptual complexity that is perhaps best approached psychosocially (Price, 2009). In Chapter 2 I discussed the rise of first-person media, of which makeover television is a part, and the saturation in this media of confessional tropes and of 'extraordinary subjectivity' (Dovey, 2000). Therapeutic language, culture and ethos – or as Furedi suggests, 'therapeutics' – has clear links with self-help culture in the United States (McGee, 2005) and specifically as some have suggested with the personal development movement (Palmer, 2004) but perhaps most significantly in terms of subjectivity, therapeutics segues into the first-person media invitation to *speak oneself* as part of a wider healing process.

In the case of parenting, therapeutic culture has become so central because of the sense of a disciplinary crisis and an emotional deficit amongst parents. The oft-repeated fiction which has come to 'function in truth' around parenting is that parents are overwhelmed by a dizzying choice in matters of childrearing. A cacophony of debates about parenting are concerned to weigh up the relative merits of different childrearing techniques or different approaches to discipline. These debates have continued without interruption for at least a

century; indeed the parenting advice industry – as I explored in Chapter 1 – relies upon the regeneration and rehearsal of debates between different sets of ‘best practice’ parenting.

Enter any site where parenting advice is dispensed – whether an online portal, a section in a bookshop, or an NCT class – and the advice on offer will be rhetorically paraded as polyvocal; that is, different kinds of advice, and differently qualified experts, line up to offer their respective knowledges, techniques and philosophies to parents. Polyvocality can sometimes lead to heated arguments in which experts, and the parents loyal to them, passionately proclaim the rightness of this philosophy over that one, in what has been called the ‘morality flick of advice’¹. Sometimes polyvocal experts have a lesson no more ambitious than tolerant relativity; as long as the parents are able to find a philosophy ‘that best suits them’, everything will turn out fine. As noted in Chapter 1, some historical theorists have succumbed to the seduction of polyvocality, suggesting that precisely because the advice industry has proliferated and experts have become numerous, the absolute authority of the childrearing expert has gradually become eroded. In these historical accounts, the story of advice is one of progress and empowerment, in which contemporary advice is navigated through with considerable parental agency.

But this story of progress sidesteps the issues of why some models of advice flourish at particular times whilst others do not, and what the role of psychology plays in creating

¹ This phrase was used by Ellie Lee at ‘Parenting advice and the media’ a roundtable discussion held at Cambridge University, UK in November 2006.

particular ideas about the (parental) self. It also sidesteps just how narrow the offered 'solutions' to parenting challenges are; they are all psychological, therapeutic and individualised. In popular psychology, illustrated by magazines such as *Psychologies* but also in makeover television which promises to transform the psychological subject, and more widely in therapy culture, the self is spoken as an autonomous, rational and agentic subject who is able to transform oneself and live better through psychological self-knowledge. The parental self that is envisaged and (re)produced here has clear links to neoliberalism and to the foregrounding of 'freedom, consumption, choice, agency and futurity in a powerful and seductive post-feminist cultural ideal' (Tyler, forthcoming: 2). Importantly, this neoliberal self is also considered to be unfettered by the 'old' constraints and obstacles of social class, race, gender, sexuality and so on; the neoliberal self is mobile. To take the earlier example of the 'emotional intelligence' that Briers urges his readers to instill in their children, the classed inferences of his advice is permitted to remain silent; through psychological self knowledge and the 'right' kind of labour, all parents are constructed as 'able' to inculcate emotional intelligence. Feminist scholars have taken issue with the universality of the psychological subject and its value for social change. Barbara Cruikshank argues that self-help is a culture of citizenship that individualizes social problems as inadequacies of self-esteem: it promises to 'solve social problems from crime and poverty to gender inequality, not against capitalism, racism or inequality, but against the order of the self and the way we govern the self' (1996: 231). Bev Skeggs (2005) suggests that the self in this context becomes a metaphoric space in which to store and display resources which are classed. Exploring specifically what kind of parent that is being interpellated in notions of 'good

parenting', Val Gillies (2005) argues that in terms of orientations to the future, reflexivity and material resources, that parent is middle-class.

In this chapter, I consider the extension of the 'psy' industries (Rose, 1989) into the realm of childrearing. I argue that *Supernanny*, far from being a trashy mis-application of psychological concepts (as many reviewers, commentators and even other parenting experts have been keen to suggest), serves as a powerful visual confirmation of the place of 'parenting' above all else in determining happiness. *Supernanny* is a key cog in the elevation of the psychological, moralistic and individualistic neoliberal selfhood above other accounts of society which excavate the economic and the sociological. I examine how the narrative formula and the psychological vocabularies that are employed within *Supernanny* produce a pathologised parenting habitus (Bourdieu, 1992) which is laden with affect and melodrama, that is then remedied through recourse to individualised and decontextualised techniques. In order to appreciate the comfort (and occasional discomfort) with which this programme sits alongside 'the fiction of autonomous selfhood' (Rose, 1989, 1997), I first want to re-figure the programme within its cultural history of the advisory Nanny, who with almost-magical dexterity is able to create 'order from disorder' and transform disconnected parents into intimate domestic sovereigns.

'The devil version of Mary Poppins'

The symbolic and cultural histories that knot together in *Supernanny* are many, and what we might think of as the lineage of the programme are multiple and at times contradictory. In making the labour of childrearing visible, when it is so often invisible and hard to articulate (Stadlen, 2004) the programme seems at moments akin to feminist consciousness-raising; and yet, in making childrearing and its attendant anxieties visible, the programme operates within wider neoliberal landscapes which privatise social injustice.

One of the figures whose cultural history is pertinent to an excavation of the programme – the Nanny, a woman employed by a household with children to carry out the duties of childcare – has an often misrepresented history. Sometimes the Nanny would be responsible to some degree for the childrens' education, but not to the formal degree of the Governess or tutor employed by aristocratic families. Not quite a servant – but certainly neither a full member of the household, the Nanny occupies an intimate place within the ranks of those in the employ of another family. Caitlin Flanagan (2005) suggests while the British nanny is often thought of as one of England's oldest institution, she was actually relatively short-lived. Her reign was between the early days of Queen Victoria's time on the throne and the end of the Second World War, 'when industrialisation and a population explosion among both the poor and the middle class brought the two groups together in a highly regimented and hierarchical servant culture' (2005: 4). Despite the brevity of this reign, the Nanny has come to occupy a particularly fond place in British culture. For

Flanagan, this is principally due to the groundbreaking epoch of children's literature that was published in the first half of the twentieth century by writers who (mis)remembered their own childhood relationships with various household adults, both related and otherwise. In particular the 'Mary Poppins' stories by P.L. Travers, which would later be re-scripted by Walt Disney and turned into a film that won five Academy Awards, have been foundational in sustaining the notion of the Nanny far beyond her institutional life.

The Edwardian Nanny of the Mary Poppins stories – 'formally trained, bred to the job, imperious, unflappable, and immaculately turned out' (Flanagan, 2005: 7) – was an unfamiliar servant to many more families than she was familiar to, and certainly unfamiliar to the audience that the Disney film was aimed at. It is testament to the power of the story's sentimental rewrite by Walt Disney that the (Disney version of the) Poppins story continues to serve as *the* cultural reference point of nanny culture.

The character of Poppins is an ambivalent figure, perhaps more so in the Travers' books than in the Disney film. In her biography of Travers, Valerie Lawson (1999) suggests that Poppins has something of the sadist in her; although she cares for the children and has moments of tenderness with them, she also appears distant from them for much of the time. She scolds the children, belittles and humiliates them and is often angry and impatient with them. She takes them on supernatural adventures to exciting places, but then denies scornfully that anything magical has happened at all. She is vain and frequently gazes at herself in mirrors. When the children are naughty, she threatens and frightens them and

allows events in the supernatural realms they visit to become strange and terrifying by way of her revenge. Many of the darker aspects of the Travers' books are softened in the film, where Mary Poppins is played by the sweet-natured, well-spoken and ever-singing Julie Andrews, but in the stage musical which premiered in 2004 in London her punitive personality returns. Whilst I am not seeking to simply 'reclaim' the figure of Mary Poppins, it is worth remembering that the version of Poppins who survives is the sanitised and loving Disney version, yet there is a haunting darkness to the original stories which persists even in this².

Her closest friendship is with Bert, a 'screever' (pavement chalk artist) and occasional seller of chestnuts, and in the Disney film a chimney sweep. When Poppins' charges – the Banks children – get lost in the East End slums, it is Bert who finds them and returns them home safely. Poppins, then, is readable as an upwardly mobile working-class woman; she does not fall into the same social class as Governesses who were almost always downwardly mobile genteel woman, professionally trained and responsible for the education of older children. Being among other things 'prim, spick and span', Poppins is a 'classic caricature'

² The persistence of these darker elements of the woman invited in to care for one's children can be seen in the film *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992, Curtis Hansen) in which a vengeful and homicidal nanny (played by the terrifying Rebecca De Mornay) sets out to destroy a mother's life and steal her family. In an extraordinary catalogue of horror, the film draws on themes of molestation, paedophilia, infidelity and murder, all emanating from the apparently greater horror of the infertile woman whose hand rocks the cradle. Meanwhile, in a 2006 'mash-up' of Disney's *Mary Poppins*, Chris Rule rewrites the supernaturalism of the film, drawing on familiar tropes of horror and suspense. See the trailer at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T5_0AGdFic

of the upwardly mobile woman whose roots lie in the tidy respectability of working-class life³.

The Banks' children come to love and adore Mary Poppins, stern and disciplinarian as she is. They ask her when she will leave, and implore and beg her to stay with them. Michael cries in anguish, 'oh Mary Poppins, you'll never leave us will you?' But Mary Poppins is not a permanent Nanny; just as she blows in with a hurricane, she tells the children she 'will leave when the wind changes'. Poppins will create 'order from disorder' but she makes no promises to remain with the children, despite the heartbreak they suffer when she leaves abruptly. Her impermanence is echoed by another troubleshooting Nanny; Nanny McPhee of the film of the same name (2005, dir: Kirk Jones), in which McPhee confirms to the children that 'when you need me, but do not want me, then I must stay. When you want me, but no longer need me, then I have to go'.

While the literary Poppins' transience in the Banks' household seems bound up with her fantastical links with the supernatural world – her transience, her comings and goings throughout the literary series, is part of her magic – the Disney film version is quite different. The Disney version of Poppins is there for a purpose, and her purpose is to transform the elder Banks. The Disney scriptwriters, Richard and Robert Sherman, rewrote the parts of both Mr and Mrs Banks in order to create a need for Mary Poppins to

³ For a more thorough discussion, see Farah Mendelsohn's review of the biographical and critical canon of the Mary Poppins story at http://www.greenmanreview.com/book/book_grilli_lawson_poppins.html

visit the family. Caitlin Flanagan (2005) discusses the 'journey' they created for the film version of the Banks; Mr Banks became an emotionally absent workaholic who lacked empathy for his children and desired control and order above all else, whilst Mrs Banks was rewritten as a Suffragette who has lost sight of her most important duty of raising her children. As Flanagan remarks, Mary Poppins' 'main objective is to transform Mr Banks from a prig to a loving mid-century American-style dad, with a hankering for kiddie fun and family time. But she's got half an eye on the missus' (2005: 7). By the end of the film, Mrs Banks uses her 'Votes for Women' sash as a tail for her childrens' kite. Her transformation from feminist freedom fighter to devoted mother is complete. Flanagan wryly observes that it is no accident that the moral of the film – 'fire the nanny!' – coincides neatly with Walt Disney's personal vision of family life, 'father at work, mother at home, children flourishing' (ibid). In this version, which appalled Travers, the Mary Poppins story became 'anti-nanny propaganda' as much as a celebration of her magical power to restore domestic harmony. Significantly, the Disney version of Mary Poppins functionalises her as a family therapist; to create parental emotional presence in ways that resonated, and continue to resonate in texts such as *Supernanny*, with the psychological needs of children.

When the *Supernanny* format was first exported to Australia, anthropologist Stephen Juan described Jo Frost the Supernanny as a 'devil version of Mary Poppins'. The programme explicitly draws on Poppins for inspiration, particularly with regards to her Britishness. British nannies are fodder in other parenting programmes, specifically in *Nanny 911* (Fox, 2004-2007, CMT 2007-present, United States) which takes this romantic nostalgia even

further and features Nannies, a Head Nanny and even a butler as the childrearing experts, all in period dress. Alongside dealing with temper tantrums, *Nanny 911* also promises to teach 'social etiquette'. Frost herself acknowledged the significance of her Britishness when beginning filming for the American version of *Supernanny*:

What I did notice is that the Americans have a very high regard for the British nanny, and the standards and the etiquette that we have. That's very much respected over there, added to which, of course, they love the accent.

(Channel 4 interview with Benjie Goodhart, March 2005)

Visually, the Poppins-esque reference is clear – Frost appears immaculately turned out in a tailored suit, an overnight bag and an umbrella. Also clear are the comparative functional and finite nature of their visits – like Poppins, Frost will 'stay until the wind changes', until family harmony and order is restored. But where Poppins acquiesces to the servant hierarchy she belongs to and defers to her employers, effecting changes in the Banks' family through subterfuge and trickery (and of course magic), Frost boldly criticises parents. In Chapter 7 of this thesis, I explore how Frost's boldness made some viewers angry; they challenged her authority and her legitimacy to criticism, in ways that invoked the servitude associated with the Nanny. Where the Banks' children are excited by Poppins' arrival and want her to never leave, it is grateful parents and suspicious children that greet Frost⁴ – and

⁴ Suspicious, and sometimes outright hostile. Brothers Flynn and Cameron concoct their own 'poisonous water' to 'kill Supernanny and get her out of our house' (Series 5, Episode 1), whilst nine-year-old Megan screams "my friend thinks you're a bitch and so do I" at Frost and physically attacks her.

it is mothers, not children, who often shed a tear when the wind changes and she has to leave. And whilst, in some episodes, Frost seems to take delight in creating a Poppins-like magic for children – with the extensive illusion involved in such tricks as the Nappy Pirates and the Dummy Fairy – the transformation she offers is principally concerned with creating order, routines and consistency.

Stephen Juan's assessment of Frost as a 'devil version of Poppins' deserves closer attention, and needs to be set within the wider context of his comments on the programme:

It is the outmoded view of the controlling parent. It is so destructive psychologically. It seems to be so anti-children. It puts the needs of parents first. There is nothing wrong with putting children's needs up there. You don't want to turn into a prison-guard parent. This show is about taming rather than understanding. You will not be the helping parent. You will be the controlling parent and when the child gets older they can't be controlled any more. Nature builds in to us to nurture a child. This show is recommending *we go against our basic nature.*"

(Quoted by Edwards in the *Spring Morning Herald*, 24th April 2005, emphasis added)

To list Juan's criticisms, Frost's approach to discipline is 'destructive', 'outmoded', 'anti-children' and 'controlling', and moreover goes against 'our basic nature'. His criticisms circulate around notions of understanding, empathy and the 'helping parent'; the parent who patiently encourages, who seeks to develop a child's sense of agentic morality and who nurtures the child's sense of self. The individualist terms of the programme are not the

problem for Juan, but rather the misapplication of psychological knowledge, used to control and tame rather than to nurture and grow.

Rather than defending Frost, or siding with Juan, I want to now unpick the theoretical underpinnings that require us to pick a side in the first place in this morality flick of advice, and to pay closer attention to the psychological vocabularies that are employed – both within the programme and by critics of the programme such as Juan. I want to argue that these vocabularies enable some theorists to collude with the individualising and psychologising processes of both the programme, and the neoliberal parenting moralism that they exist within. One of the key theorists whose work is often used to buttresses up these kinds of individualist approaches to parenting is Anthony Giddens.

Parents, children and the ‘pure relationship’

Giddens’ work is crucial to the work of this thesis, not least because he has been seen by many commentators as providing the theoretical underpinnings for the meritocratic project of New Labour (Skeggs, 2005; Gillies, 2005). Across his vast corpus of work, Giddens has argued optimistically that late modernity is as much a progressive move away from tradition, as it is a cultural climate which facilitates and demands a continuously reflexive relationship with one’s self. In his *Transformations of Intimacy* (1992) he argues that

Michel Foucault's work emphasises sexuality at the expense of gender, and indeed this work can be read as Giddens' attempt to reinstate gender in a history of intimacy.

Giddens argues that from the nineteenth century onwards, romantic judgements and the marital bond increased in significance, in isolation of wider kinship ties. Many factors, including the limiting of family size, the separation of sexuality from pregnancy and birth through contraception and the new 'malleability' of sexuality resulted in husbands and wives becoming 'collaborators in a joint emotional enterprise' (1992: 26). The 'post-traditional order', to use his terms, is one in which obligations, responsibilities and ways of relating to one another are no longer determined by custom or ritual. Rather, individuals must negotiate or 'work out' (Finch, 1989) through talk, and construct their own ethical ways of being. Giddens sees this post-traditional order as a legacy of feminism, gay identity politics, female autonomy, contraception, and the mainstreaming of psychoanalysis, in which the 'democratisation of the private sphere' is the extension of democracy itself as a principle of intimacy; or as Giddens phrases it, 'the possibility of intimacy means the promise of democracy' (1992: 188). Released from the certainties – and inequalities – of tradition, the post-traditional subject is also an autonomous individual; self-reflective, self-determining, self-regulating:

In a post-traditional order, the narrative of self has to be continually reworked, and life-style practices brought in line with it, if the individual is to combine personal autonomy with a sense of ontological security. (1992: 75)

These conditions enable what Giddens terms the 'pure relationship'; men and women, shorn of institutional or automatic gendered obligations, with an equal stake in determining the conditions of their association and arrange their relationships on an individualised and emotional basis. The pure relationship is elective, negotiated, plural and varied. Decisions surrounding how to relate to others, how to conduct oneself, and the very ethics of everyday interaction, take on the resonances of selfhood; 'given the lapse of tradition, the question 'who shall I be?' is inextricably bound up with 'how shall I live?' (1992: 198).

Therapy and self-help become integral resources in answering these questions. The reflexive and self-conscious rumination around ethics and the practicalities of relationality have become part of a continual interrogation of past, present and future, and therapy/self-help manuals, television programmes and magazine articles are textual demonstrations of this reflexive individualisation. Giddens offers the example of the figure of the 'addict', a category of being that is made meaningful as a *type of person* rather than as a social problem, and the proliferation of this reflexive identity across multiple sites along with its own narrative, such as the state of 'being in denial' and the 'twelve steps' narrative of recovery. We could note here parallels within parenting culture, as categories of ontological meaning have been transformed; the 'poor parent' rewritten not just as a moral category but as a psycho-medical subject in pursuit of strategies for change. The self becomes a reflexive endeavour produced through discursive accounting in 'coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives' (1991: 5). As tradition loses its hold, life-style, life planning, and taking consideration of risks are all filtered through expert knowledges. In terms of the

consequences for how parenting advice is sought after and distributed, generationally-passed knowledge – the ‘voice of Grandma’ – recede in the pursuit of scientific knowledges, experts and educators.

One important effect of this disembedding and diverging of knowledges is doubt, and the absence of final authorities, which for Giddens ‘permeates’ the social world. All expertise is open to the possibility of revision and alteration; for Giddens, this itself is the guarantee of empowerment; ‘fateful moments’ mark a crossroads of life-planning; taking notice of new possibilities and new demands constitutes moments of subjectivity itself; ‘a decision to enter therapy can generate empowerment’ (1991: 143). Giddens considers the position of academic endeavours, such as sociology itself, and suggests that they, too, are not just ‘about’ the reflexivity of modernity, but themselves constitute, alongside manuals, guides, therapeutic works and self-help surveys, contested and divergent ‘systems of accumulated expertise’ which both form important disembedding influences and represent multiple sources of authority.

Giddens’ work around intimacy and family relationships is certainly optimistic, but it is also however fraught with problems. In her critique of his *Transformation of Intimacy* work, Lynne Jamieson (1999) points out that Giddens is very selective of the psychological theory he draws on, and is completely silent on that which implies the inevitability of inner conflict, disappointment and discontent. Others, such as David Morgan (1996), have cast doubt upon the story of change in relationships, ‘from institution to relationship’ that

Giddens reproduces, somewhat uncritically, in his work. The story of the progressive 'pure relationship' not only simplifies (and silences) the continuation of structural inequalities – gendered and otherwise – within relationships, it also reproduces the very discourses of expertise that promise to mediate pure relationships. In other words, Giddens fails to sociologically interrogate how the idea of the 'pure relationship' is *itself* constitutive of a 'need' for relationship expertise.

Who, for example, is able to experiment in self-invention? Giddens presumes a kind of hyper-rationalist universal subject who is endowed with not only equivalent resources with which to invent him or herself, but also with identical claims to be recognised as such. Critiques of his model of the modern transformation of intimacy have pointed to the theoretical neglect of power dynamics in the struggle for self-hood.

We must not lose sight of the fact that this argument is not based on wide evidence but on predominantly white, middle-class ideals from western societies, in which articulate, affluent individuals can afford to experiment with narratives of self-invention. (Chambers, 2000: 209)

This specific concept of self-identity presumes an inner coherence, a 'normal' self-identity, which can be known as normal on the basis of its continuity, integrity and self-regarding; individuals who have trouble with these entitlements must have (it follows) fractured, disabled or fragile selves. This rehearses a particular classed orientation to the self, that of

'possessive individualism' (Lury, 1998; Strathern, 1999; Skeggs, 2004) in which one is able to define oneself as an individual, legitimate and accumulate value upon that basis and act strategically and rationally. Carolyn Steedman's (2000) exploration of how the receipt of welfare assistance is predicated upon being able to narrate a particular biography alerts us to the ways in which the notion of the 'possessed individual' is contingent upon material resources, as well as access to a specific orientation to the self. Giddens gestures towards how, 'of course, life chances condition lifestyle choices' (1991: 81), but he certainly does not adequately interrogate how his own concept of the subject rehearses these classed presumptions surrounding selfhood.

As Jamieson points out, there has been a wealth of feminist research on the issues of gendered complexity within lived intimacy and accounts of that lived intimacy, little of which Giddens engages with. This work documents how the burdens of gender inequality that are carried by women are recast as psychological inadequacy (Dobash and Dobash, 1992), the greater proportion of 'emotion work' that is done by women in relationships (Hochschild, 1990) and the creative energy that is deployed in accounts of relationships in disguising inequality rather than undermining it (Bittman and Lovejoy, 1993).

For Jamieson, and others (Scott and Jackson, 1997), the empirical research around relationships in the family does not support Giddens' optimistic hopes for the pure relationship, and she does not share his belief that relationship change will diffuse from the personal into other arenas; "ironically...[this] gives credence to the popular psychology of

changing the world by transforming your inner self at the expense of more sociological accounts of social change” (1999: 490). In spite of these problems, Giddens’ notion of the ‘pure relationship’ as elective, negotiable and part of the project of the self, has extended beyond the couple relationship and into the parent-child relationship within the context of family policy and other fields. As well as the shift in policy from addressing ‘husbands and wives’ towards ‘mothers and fathers’ in policy (Williams, 2004), the parent-child relationship too has been re-formulated in terms of creating intimacy, negotiating power and with reference to notions of understanding, empathy and communication.

The idealisation of these terms as being ‘best for the child’ negates any consideration of how the meanings of a ‘good’ parent-child relationship vary considerably by social class and ethnicity (Brannen *et al* 1994). Whilst all mothers spoke of the importance that their teenage children knew they were loved and cared for, it was white middle-class mothers who spoke in terms we might theorise as those of the pure relationship; empathy, understanding, talking, listening and ‘knowing’. Brannen and her colleagues also found that the ‘confiding’ relationship that mothers spoke of having with their children were not necessarily experienced as such by teenagers; ‘knowing’ as a form of intimacy and ‘knowing’ as a form of control muddled the ‘purity’ of such relationships.

Empirical research has found that the labour of creating these ‘pure relationships’ (or perhaps problematic illusions of pure relationships) is considerable. They require patience, time and energy; resources that are not evenly experienced or available for all mothers. In

her work on the ideology of 'intensive mothering', Sharon Hays points out that 'providing choices and engaging in negotiation are luxuries' (1996: 93) that not all mothers have. In their critique of developmental psychologists' account of the 'sensitive mother', Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey point to the endless creative work she must engage in to disguise the 'spectre of authoritarianism' (1989:24) that is an undeniable part of the power dynamics of families. Through labour and invention, she must disguise her power over her child, use reasoning and pseudo-democracy to create the *illusion* of choice even where there is none, in order to foster childrens' self-esteem through a *sense* of independence.

The language games that come into play around parenting strategies are complex and rich.

The idealised 'pure relationship' is not only itself a highly constructed and highly contentious term; it is also a term which reproduces decontextualised hierarchies of value around parenting that are divorced from a sociological appreciation of difference. For Oullette and Hay, the US version of *Supernanny* is one site where the 'so-called lenient parenting techniques' (2008: 95) of the 1960's are reversed, and 'permissive parenting' is transformed with the help of Jo Frost into good domestic governing. The dichotomy of permissive ('bad') parenting and authoritarian ('good') parenting is redrawn through the lens of *necessary* obedience, responsibility and rationality. But the struggle over terms doesn't stop there. As Val Gillies (2007) has convincingly argued, the investment in or dis-identification with 'permissive' parenting also has other resonances, specifically classed resonances. She suggests that, for example, where a middle-class child 'acting out' is likely to be parentally defended as 'bored' or 'expressing' him or herself, a corresponding

working-class child will find him or herself attached to a more negative label; a labeling and attribution process that Gillies claims parents are differentially equipped to resist or refute.

Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) make a similar argument in their work, arguing that whilst childrens' 'autonomy' might be theoretically valued in 'progressive' theories of child development, the actual behaviour of children themselves is made meaningful in different ways depending upon their social class:

If working-class children were quiet in the waiting room of a doctor's surgery, they were repressed. If they were noisy they were hooligans. If middle-class children were noisy and ran around they were 'independent and autonomous' (1989: 41)

When notions of 'the pure relationship' are deployed for the parent-child, it seems to be just as problematic as the pure relationship for the adult couple; both require the social actors within them to deploy tactics and creative labour in order to both sustain the illusion of negotiation and agency, and minimise or deny inequalities and imbalances. The balancing act for the parent-child relationship – between authority, discipline and obedience on the one hand, and intimacy, empathy and choice on the other – is a significant pivot upon which the drama of *Supernanny* balances; and occasionally becomes unsteady.

The pure relationship in *Supernanny*

In some ways, the family problems that *Supernanny* visualises and presents in the first few minutes of each episode are constructed as illustrations of what happens when 'pure relationships' between parents and children go *too far*. What are the problems? Though they are varied, particular themes emerge as common across episodes; children lack boundaries, they are not being disciplined appropriately, consistently or adequately, parents are not exercising authority or the children are 'in charge'. These problems resonate acutely with the narration of a 'crisis of adult authority' (Furedi, 2009) and can also be seen as part of a cultural backlash against leniency, and a call to reinstate generational authority.

The *Supernanny* family is a family in which the 'natural order' of power and authority has become disrupted. Rather than being united in their authority, parents are at war with one another, and enterprising children have seized control. The costs of pursuing, wilfully or otherwise, a pure relationship (in the sense of too much choice and too few boundaries) with children is associated in *Supernanny* with spousal strife, with the breakdown of the couple's pure relationship. One cannot have both. Many couples are introduced as 'on the verge of breaking up' and the possible future dissolution of couple relationships *because of* children's bad behaviour becomes a motif. I want to briefly explore in more detail how the problems of one family – the Hancox-Smiths – is narrated, in order to excavate the complexity of the pure relationship that is precariously narrated between mother and father and parent and child.

The relationship between mother Jenny and father Simon (Series 5, Episode 1) is described, in their words, as 'not really existing at all'. The voiceover narrates the "vice-like grip" of their three-year-old daughter Madison over her mother as constitutive of this spousal strife, to the point that neither 'can bear to be apart'. Madison's prolonged breastfeeding and co-sleeping with her mother is too narrated as driving a wedge between her parents, and preventing them from sharing a bed. When Frost arrives, she states in no uncertain terms that 'this little girl has too much control and quite frankly its no good for her'. Regarding Jenny and Simon's marriage, she is 'surprised it's lasted as long as it has'. When Simon offers his explanation as to why the childrens' behaviour is so bad – 'I've got no control over the kids because they just don't see me as a father figure' – Frost berates him in a highly gendered language;

What kind of *man* doesn't demand to be in his *own* bed with his *own* missus in his *own* house?

The intensity of Jenny and Madison's relationship is constructed as psychologically unhealthy – she clings, she exerts a vice-like grip, and moreover, daughter is an obstacle to a 'healthy relationship between you [parents]'. Frost suggests that Jenny is using Madison as 'a big pillow' between her and her husband, and that she is substituting 'proper' heterosexual conjugal intimacy with 'improper' prolonged mother-infant intimacy. This might be read as a critique of long-term attachment parenting, articulated through a rubric of psychological and conjugal health, and as such harking back to authoritarian parenting and gender-ordered families as a solution to these excesses.

We should also remember that the regulatory scrutiny, both in *Supernanny* and across other sites of developmental psychology expertise, of 'age-appropriate' behaviour encourages a certain managerialism which is both narrow and shallow. Frequently, a verdict of 'baby-ing' is offered. This verdict is concerned with holding, comforting and carrying children who are 'too big' or with the use of dummies, nappies and highchairs for children who 'should' have outgrown them. As Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) note in their exploration of mother-daughter transcribed conversations, the exhortation to be a 'big girl' was often creatively resisted by girls who desired to remain the little, beloved and adored family babies, and who were jealously angry towards the younger siblings that were usurping them. Resistances around toddlers becoming 'big girls' are also effected by their mothers, for whom growing children and empty cradles may represent complex fears and fantasies; the loss of fertile youth, the spectre of the future empty nest. As Walkerdine and Lucey point out, growing up and being a 'big girl' can be frightening in terms of the embrace of power that it requires; a power that some mothers themselves may not feel as adults. These complex fears and desires are given short shrift by the developmental managerialism of the programme, which can only interpret these resistances and refusals as willful stubbornness, indisciplinary and an absence of much-needed boundaries.

However, the position of the programme towards pure relationships is not clear-cut, but rather, precarious. Communication is pursued with children, although in circumscribed ways, principally through Frost gifting them with boxes and diaries into which they are

encouraged to write and record problems and thoughts. It is important to note that house rules and routine boards are never presented as an issue for discussion or negotiation with children (or parents); rather, Frost brings these with her when the transformation is to begin. The pure relationship then ebbs and flows within the programme as an ideal to be pursued and a cause of problems. The psychological meanings associated with it also shift between the spousal relationship and the parent-child.

What *kind* of parent?

As I explore in Chapter 1, the rise of the parenting advice industry has been seen as enabling parents to operate with the freedom of a consumer, choosing to 'buy the book' rather than feeling compelled to go 'by the book' (Hulbert 2003). The parent-expert relationship has transformed and become one of diplomacy, negotiation and partnership (Apple, 2006).

Whilst the concept of parental consumer agency makes for an empowering story, we cannot ignore the similarities between different bodies of parenting advice. All deploy a psychological ethic, in which the material world and all its inequalities recede, and the unitary subject takes centre stage. Celebrating their polyvocality requires us first to see different bodies of advice *as* different in the first place; but more than this, it requires us to see all parents as self-possessed entrepreneurs, equally confident and competent at weighing up knowledges and cleanly applying techniques to their lives. Parenting advice assumes a particular kind of parental self to begin with; one who is oriented towards 'parenting' in the

neo-liberal sense of objectively learning and becoming technically proficient in child-rearing, a specific orientation towards oneself as a professional childrearer and towards the futurity of one's child(ren).

As I have already discussed (see Chapter 4), the preference within political fields is for speaking of 'parenting', rather than 'mothering', despite evidence that it is mothers who continue to perform the bulk of childcare, take responsibility for children's emotional development and are more likely to be called upon as principle executors of welfare and justice orders (Drakeford, 1996; Lawler, 2000; Tincknell, 2005). This preference gestures towards the desire for childrearing to be unmarked by gender, but in light of material evidence it seems rather fanciful. 'Parenting' in this sense also embodies very specific values, ones which emanate from cultural spaces and lifestyles which are middle-class (Gillies, 2005) even as they are constructed as right, appropriate, natural or normal. If we celebrate the proliferation of polyvocal parenting advice without carefully questioning the discursive 'parenting' underpinnings, we negate questioning the very 'psy' terms in which these parenting debates are cast, and we embed notions of choice, reflexivity and rationality within the wider scaffold of individualisation. In other words, we renounce a sustained exploration of the material landscapes – contradictory, antagonistic and painful – in which subjects live out their relational struggles. We presume we all experience choice when in fact there may be none.

The very rehearsal of arguments about how to parent – indeed the very labour of selecting a body of expertise to adopt – invites a new relationship to oneself as a parent, an investment in reflexive parenting, intensive, expert-guided, thoughtful, and self-scrutinising. The question ‘what kind of parent do you want to be’ naturalises and circulates a particular vision of the parental subject, as one facet of what Ouellette and Hay (2008) have termed ‘idealised citizen subjectivities’; that is, a subject who is able to ask this very question, who is oriented towards being or becoming *a particular kind* of parent. In a sense it does not matter how the subject answers (or attempts to answer) this question, since *it is through the process of asking it* that one is able to produce oneself as a reflexive neo-liberal parent.

‘Parenting’ in this sense has come to refer less to specific methods through which children might be raised; rather it gestures to a set of orientations bound up with being or becoming a particular kind of self. In terms of debates around subjectivity, parenting television – of which *Supernanny* is the most prevalent and popular example – offers us just one site in which we can think through the complexities of relating to ourselves as if we are coherent, unified and whole, even as we experience fragmentation, contradiction and struggle in the process of becoming subjects. Importantly, an analysis of parenting television, and the subject positions offered up within it, demonstrates how classed and gendered inequalities become reproduced through discursive practices. The psychologising of parenting, as an application of psy regimes to practices of childrearing, is a significant space in which the cultural logic of neo-liberalism is impacting upon citizen subjectivities. Nikolas Rose (1989) discusses the foundationality of psy to the technologies of government which produce these citizen subjectivities. Practices of the self such as self-scrutiny, inspection,

control of the body, speech and movement, the evoking of conscience and the provoking of reflection all contribute, Rose argues, to a kind of moral subjectivity through which 'individuals were to be subjected not by an alien gaze but through a reflexive hermeneutics' (1989: 77).

This moral subjectivity – what Rose terms the 'soul of the citizen' – is integral to advanced liberal society, in which freedom is, in his words, "more than merely an ideology. Subjects are obliged to be free, to construe their existence as the outcome of choices that they make among a plurality of alternatives" (ibid). Subjectivity for Rose is not an ideological crushing, but a Foucauldian discursive production, which draws on the vocabularies and techniques of psychology; counselling and therapy, mental hygiene, group relations and psychodynamics. The 'soul of the citizen' is the focus of a polyvocal collection of concerned and humanistic experts, and the modern citizen becomes 'subjectified, educated and solicited into a loose and flexible alliance between personal interpretations and ambitions and institutionally or socially valued ways of living' (1989: 79). The multiplication of experts, vocabularies, evaluations, techniques and ethics offers choice in a very narrow sense; one which is, and can only ever be, 'intrinsically' psychological.

For Rose, one of the 'truth effects' of this 'therapeutic culture of the self' is that lived difficulties and struggles become thinkable *only* in psychological terms. Les Back (2007) asks the pertinent question of why the panels of experts that appear on reality television routinely include psychologists, nutritionists and life coaches but have yet to include a

sociologist. Similarly, parenting television only ever employs psychological vocabularies in order to both diagnose and treat parenting malaise. Parents are asked, 'what kind of parent are you, right now?' This apparently open question can only be answered within these narratives in one way; in terms of their psychological wellbeing and happiness. Material lives are absent from the televising of poor parenting and good parenting; similarly, the question 'what are the conditions in which you are parenting, right now' seems uninteresting, or perhaps not dramatic enough for the drama of makeover. The two ends of this spectrum are visible only in terms of psychological health, reflection, resolve and technical competence. Parents are told they are 'in denial', they have failed to 'enforce boundaries', they have developed 'passive-aggressive' parenting styles:

This is a destructive dysfunctional cycle...You are pacifying for his behaviour.

(Series 4, Episode 1)

Your love has become destructive. It's shameful to watch.

(Series 1, Episode 1)

This is about changing the family's negative relationship to food.

(Series 4, Episode 11)

These examples illustrate the limited lens through which poor parenting and good parenting, and how to move between them, are visualised as resolutely psychological; always the result of individual inadequacies and problems at the level of the self, always solved through working on the self. Makeover subjects might, occasionally, rail against this

language of psychology, and attempt to flesh it out, or tell their material side, with other kinds of stories. These brief moments, when they happen, are positioned narratively as a necessary and dramatic emotional purging, a digression or an aside, before the business of rational action, rather than evoking attention in their own right. These moments enrich the drama of personal resolve, but they do not usurp the psychological apparatus through which change is effected. I want to explore two of these moments and how they are narratively recouped through the language of psy.

In the first episode of *Supernanny*, mother Lucy voices her physical exhaustion in a camera aside after a week of struggling with her own shift work and the demands of Supernanny's behavioural techniques. She expresses her doubts about how workable these techniques really are for her and her family, and offers a potent critique of intensive behavioural methods, which, she suggests, presume that parents are only ever parents and do not have other tiring demands, such as employment. Although her to-camera confession makes it past the editing room and her doubts are broadcast, they are not directly addressed by either the parenting expert Jo Frost or by the accompanying voiceover. Rather her exhaustion itself becomes another point for a psychologically phrased intervention. Frost chides her for 'slipping';

I've noticed in the footage you've started to slip, the small, but important, mistakes...you've *got* to maintain that authority. When we're *tired*, that's when we *lapse*.

When you *don't* because you're tired, that's when Charlie gets the message that's it always

a game. Don't distract him with choices. Already – he's calling the shots. Can you see how subtly he's calling the shots?

(Series 1, Episode 1)

The exhaustion incurred by the parental labour that the techniques require is not framed as a problem to be addressed; rather it becomes another site of failure. Lucy's exhaustion, and her corresponding doubts and lapses, are not constructed as evidence of the material difficulties that she is having balancing employment, the demands of her son Charlie and her other three children. Instead, these lapses become evidence that Lucy is not committed at an ontological level to becoming the 'right kind' of parent. She is compensating for her tiredness in the wrong ways – distracting Charlie with choices, allowing him to 'call the shots', letting her authority slip. The causal underpinnings of Lucy's exhaustion are silenced, and because they are not addressed or even acknowledged by the expert, she becomes positioned at the furtive moments of her to-camera doubts as something of a saboteur.

In another example of recouping, Heather and Alex, the parents of the Bixley family in the second series, are struggling with their two sons – the elder of which has developed a 'phobia of food'. They are instructed by Jo Frost to offer their children 'healthy option' menus, written on paper plates, from which their children are invited to choose their meal. A week and a half into the techniques, Heather and Alex fall into an argument about who is drawing up the bulk of the menus, and eventually decide to take 'a night off' from the paper

plates. They take their children out for fast food, and are subsequently reprimanded by Supernanny when she returns. She plays footage of the episode to them via a laptop (a familiar surveillant technique of the programme) and deconstructs the explanation they offered to their boys;

What you were *really* saying is that you've had enough. We don't trust the technique.

This isn't about Brandon, this is about you guys and your attitude towards food. (Series 2, Episode 11)

Heather and Alex offer fast food to their boys as a reward, a treat for everyone, and as a night of relief from cooking themselves, telling the boys, and each other, that they are 'giving you a break tonight...we're making it easy.' The pleasures they share of going to the drive-through, ordering and eating, is visible. In the context of this episode though, the only permissible pleasures around food must be sanctioned through discourses of health and nutrition, and as such can only be extended to cooking and preparing healthy food in the family kitchen. The emotional significance of food, particularly food that is symbolically associated with sin and marked as 'bad', as a source of pleasure, warmth or safety, becomes itself a marker of pathology and dysfunction.

The emotional significance of food in the Bixley household is continually referenced as pathological. Much of the attention that is given to food, eating and mealtimes is narratively attributed to mother Heather, who poignantly describes her desires for Brandon

to eat well. Heather's desires do not exist in a vacuum; they refer in complex ways to the cultural significance of food. It is not just the Bixley family who have become preoccupied with diet – how we eat, and particularly how mothers feed their children, continues to be associated with moral worth, disciplinarity and care. The landscapes in which mother Heather finds herself besieged when she shouts in anger at her son that 'you will eat a healthy diet' and confesses in tears to Supernanny that 'I'm just so desperate for him to eat' are not simply psychological. They are psychosocial, the meeting of cultural hysteria about childhood obesity, malnutrition and the mantra of healthy eating⁵ and Heather's movement through that hysteria, absorbing along the way as she has the message that if her son eats chips every day she is a failure as a mother. Yet the source of Heather's anxieties, her concerns about her son thriving, about providing him with nourishment, painful as they are to watch, remain unspoken; she is narrated by Frost to be simply 'bullying', 'actually very scary', and 'giving attention and energy over dinnertime in a destructive way'. Her fretfulness about providing a balanced diet becomes overshadowed by the visual language of disgust; in one scene, Frost smells the family chip-pan, wrinkles her nose in repulsion, and ventriloquises the pan-lid, saying 'throw me away, throw me away!'

⁵ The associations between nutrition and value are one important way in which social class is representationally mediated and spoken, without referring directly to it. See for example the series *Jamie's School Dinners* (2006, Channel 4, UK), which followed celebrity chef Jamie Oliver as he attempted to intervene in the provision of school meals. News that some mothers were 'sabotaging' the healthy options by delivering fast food to the school gates prompted an intense cultural discussion saturated with class judgements. Oliver himself contributed to this vitriol, referring in the programme to parents who put cola and crisps in their childrens' lunchboxes as "idiots" and "morons".

Heather's apprehension about her son's nutrition does not, within this psychologised context, come to speak of the 'time famine' experienced by working parents in their food preparation; although she and her husband are employed full-time, this is referred to only once and recedes into the background of the episode. Nor does it come to speak of the unequal experience of food poverty, in which the erosion of local produce markets, the uneven geographies of housing development and regeneration and the competitive prevalence of supermarkets means that good quality, locally available produce is unevenly distributed in ways that compound other inequalities. This episode also fails to explore the complex socio-spatial relations that impact upon childrens' everyday lives and their relationship to food; a relationship that is never simply psychological, despite the official discourses to obesity by health educationalists (Rawlins, 2009). Rather, Heather's anxieties and failures around food operate within the moral landscape of individualisation in which the contents of a shopping basket come to signify sloth, disgust and indiscipline (Biressi and Nunn, forthcoming). Heather is positioned as a worthy recipient of Supernanny's anger – 'I was livid with you. Livid!' – and the camera permits corresponding disgust from the television audience.

Multiple, contradictory and antagonistic landscapes exist beyond the psychological. These landscapes may be gendered as in the struggle for domestic power between parents or siblings. They may 'class' or 'race' through frustrations with outside institutions, or through the demands of inflexible or insecure employment. There may be an intersection(s) between and across landscapes. Yet these complexities are silenced. The

relentless individualisation of every family problem is at the expense of and in the place of any context. The recouping of moments such as these, through the language of individualisation and of psy, erase culture, history and biography and we are presented instead with the promise of a rational, entrepreneurial and neo-liberal parenting transformation.

The discursive underpinnings of these parental makeovers are only ever psychological, and problematic behaviours and habits are attributed, always, to failures at the level of the self. That is, behaviours which are visible – tantrums, shouting, violence – are continually positioned as emanating from within the parental subject, through inadequacies they possess and embody. I want now to explore in more detail how the visualising of this problematic parental subject is achieved, specifically through the apparatus of the surveillant camera, and also how the concept of a parental ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1992) can be a useful means through which we can think through the promises of ontological transformation.

Visualising the ‘parental habitus’

Whilst I do locate the advice that *Supernanny* offers within a wider history of parenting expertise, it is important to point out that there is also something quite novel going on within this televising; that is to say, these programmes *cannot* simply be understood as a

televised incarnation of a lineage of expertise⁶. Parenting manuals, magazines and, more recently, websites often offer similar cognitive or behavioural techniques and are constructed with reference to overlapping discourses around gender, family and behaviour. Television programmes are also discursively arranged around similar themes, and successful programmes often spawn their own publications, related websites and spin-off magazines. The relationship between these different platforms are undoubtedly complex. However, I want to argue that parenting television such as *Supernanny* stands symbolically distinct from these other platforms, in terms of its *panoptic* quality. Other platforms may certainly attempt to wed advisory content to visual devices including photographs, illustrations, graphs and tables. In this sense, it might be argued that there have always been attempts to provide a limited visualisation of ideal parenting. I would argue though that parenting television visualises this ideal in profoundly more immediate, affective and pressing ways, in its presentation of 'real', ordinary families within their domestic space itself, suffering their parental failures right in front of the camera.

We, the television audience, look at and look on with immediacy. The camera frames the minutiae of these domestic dramas, and opens the subtleties of familial interaction out to visibility and scrutiny. The resident expert of the programme, Jo Frost, is 'present', either

⁶ One common assertion I have heard informally is that the middle classes read parenting books, and the working classes watch parenting television. Parenting television, in this explanation, emerges as a popularising or even 'democratising' system, disseminating parenting knowledge to those unlikely to buy a parenting book; a claim which both replicates patronising assumptions about the literacy of the working classes and ignores evidence that the middle classes do indeed watch reality television (Skeggs, Woods and Thumim, 2008). More importantly, it gestures towards ways in which the consumption of parenting expertise, and through which format, is recouped within a wider game of social distinction.

within the camera frame itself, or through a camera montage cutting to where she is watching events develop through a screen and listening through an earpiece. A complex web of watching and looking unfolds, a web in which the expert is caught (and she needs to be, otherwise we are not witnessing a makeover, but rather an observational documentary). The camera is positioned in order that we the audience might look over her shoulder, at the scene or at a screen. It cuts between the family action and a close-up to Frost tutting, rolling her eyes, or looking back at us wide-eyed and open-mouthed in shock, disgust or outrage, and cues the viewer into specific responses. We are invited to see what she sees, how she sees it and as she sees it, and to scrutinize as, when and how she does.

This web of watching and looking, constructed as it is through heavy post-production editing, is not quite a window into 'the real', but rather, a window into 'the actual' (Kavka and West, 2004). 'Actuality' invites a certain reflexive awareness of the staging and editing that happens in television, but also produces a new sense of 'presentness', of proximity without presence, through manipulating time and promising immediacy with the drama that is unfolding on the screen. The viscosity of transformational television grants a certain temporal immediacy, and resuscitates a feeling of 'liveness'. Even though the viewer may 'know' that episodes of *Supernanny* have been repackaged through post-production, they are invited nonetheless to participate in the illusion of 'actuality'; that what we are watching on the screen is happening as we watch, and that through watching we are looking through a window into an elsewhere, but not necessarily an else-when. In Chapter 7, I document some of the moments where viewers expressed their 'savviness' (Andrejevic, 2004) about

production techniques and editing; yet despite this, they were able to suspend their misgivings about authenticity.

Families are filmed in their own homes and neighborhoods for two weeks. Footage from both day and night time is broadcast, suggesting that this filming does take place on a near-to 24 hour basis. Some participants have themselves reported that around 200 hours of footage is produced per family⁷. After editing and post-production, this footage is whittled down to approximately 48 minutes per episode. It would be interesting to examine in more detail these editing and post-production processes that shape the content and narrative of the finished episode, and a number of researchers have produced finely detailed ethnographic accounts of the huge amount of 'behind-the-scenes' work that goes into a range of television formats (Grindstaff, 2002). For the purposes of my research, however, I am limiting myself to the finished episodes once they have been broadcast, and what is rhetorically displayed through these final episodes; for example, that filming takes place continually and across daytime and nighttime segments of the day is evident in the very *unremarkability* of shifts between day filming and night filming. Our attention as viewers is simply not drawn to this panopticon-like filming process.

⁷ In a recent art installation and project, *Return of the Real*, devised and produced by Phil Collins and Shady Lane Productions (2005), a range of reality television participants were invited to tell their stories of the filming and editing processes at a press conference held in London. In the project, one *Supernanny* participant reported that her family was filmed in total for 200 hours, and that filming was almost continuous for three weeks. This seems to be standard practice for episodes within the makeover format across a range of genres; one participant on *Dog Bristal* (BBC3, 2006) – a kind of canine *Supernanny* – remarked that the filming crew began their filming day of her and her dog at 5am each morning, obliging her to set her alarm at 4am in order to get dressed and put her 'face' on (personal communication).

The filming process mobilises a variety of techniques. A large proportion of filming happens with hand-held cameras and a mobile crew, both in the home and in public spaces such as streets, school-gates and shopping centres; yet more is obtained through mounted cameras around the home, and with night-vision technology during the night. Family members – usually parents but occasionally older siblings – are also given access to hand-held cameras that they operate themselves in private bedrooms and other parts of the house in video diary segments.

What is the purpose of this extensive surveillance? In the programme, expertise is not – as it is in the case of parenting manuals and magazines – a generalised matter of hypothetical situations, or patterns of likelihood. We are promised that the screen will show the actual, immediate impact of parenting. In some cases, the performance of ‘actuality’ requires arduous accounting, in which bad behaviour that happens hours, or even days, after instances of ‘bad practice’ is nonetheless laboriously narrated to be a direct consequence of the ‘poor parenting’ moment. It becomes reasonable to construct immediate causality with events that happen some time later. All episodes of children misbehaving must be causally linked with some prior parental failing or inadequacy, imbuing the drama of the screen with a sense of temporal immediacy. Thus we see mother Debbie berated by the voiceover when she asks her parents, who live next door, to help her settle her three lively daughters down in time for their bedtime. Her actions of one day become intimately linked, by both the voiceover and the camera, to the behaviour of her children the next day. The following

narration is accompanied by a visual montage of Debbie's daughter's playfighting, climbing the furniture and throwing their toys in the garden:

The next day, Debbie pays the price for calling her parents (Season 2, Episode 6)

This theme of behavioural justice (you get the children you deserve) is prevalent in every episode, and serves 'parenting' with an endless consequential power that it is difficult to refute in these intersections between visual evidence and explanatory voiceover. The visual apparatus through which parenting evidence is served means that privately lived complexities of relationality and power evaporate, whilst those captured by the camera balloon into central significance. For example, when mother Kelly decides to reward her childrens' good behaviour with new toys, the delight she conveys to the children in this decision and the pleasures they share on the journey to the toy store are displayed for a minimal number of frames, whilst the relatively insignificant (but far more dramatic) episode later that evening when daughter Sophie fails to pick up her socks, receives a disproportionate amount of screen time.

Having undermined Supernanny's system, Kelly is confronted with more of Sophie's defiance in the evening [...] Over the next two days, her behaviour deteriorates. (Season 1, Episode 2)

It is this panoptic quality of parenting television which means we need to look beyond the content of the expertise. Certainly, examining the psychological ethic of the programmes is one part of the work we need to do, but in addition we need to look at how this ethic is delivered visually, and how the very visibility of these programmes inscribes particular subjects as problematic. Eva Illouz (2007) points out that while the specific content of any self-help advice may be interesting, the most significant facet of it is not the content, but the emotional field in which it is anchored. In defining the emotional life of its subjects as chaotic and in need of management and control, *Supernanny* forms just one piece of the quilt of contemporary parenting culture. It promises to transform their emotional habitus of subjects – the ways they interact with their intimate others, the confidence with which they speak and take up space, the techniques they use to manage themselves – by offering cultural training in emotional competence. Illouz argues that emotional competence has become a new kind of commodity and an instrument of classification.

The programme, as I have argued in this chapter, is keen to visually document what happens in families and to apply immediate ‘solutions’ and to train parents in particular competencies within a psychological context which is blind to power dynamics. Angela McRobbie argues that popular culture is a privileged terrain in which gender relations are negotiated (2009) and television culture is one of the significant sites in which issues of ‘parenting’ – a gendered term despite its apparent gender-neutrality – are dissected and scrutinised. Programmes that examine experiences of motherhood that fall outside of social and cultural ‘norms’ are more prevalent than ever, and are promoted on the basis of what

their 'freakishness' has to say to or about all mothers; Channel 4 has become the connoisseur of this intimacy porn, broadcasting programmes such as *13 Kids and Wanting More*, *My Fake Baby* and *Half Ton Mum*⁸. As Imogen Tyler (2009) notes, the maternal subject has gone from being almost invisible to being 'spectacularly public'. What then does the visibility of *Supernanny* do to the experience of being a parent? The ontological translation of the programme might be to experience a Supernanny in your ear telling you what to do and how to deal with moments of crisis – instructional, clear directive, an ego-ideal unflustered by the messiness of flesh and blood children and offering a kind of Poppins-esque magic.

⁸ Broadcast respectively on 22nd May 2008, 2nd January 2008 and also 2nd January 2008.

Chapter 6 - Maternal Geographies

In this chapter, I want to 're-contextualise' the decontextualised family of *Supernanny*; to reflect upon the different socio-cultural landscapes in which parents do parenting work. In the previous chapter, I examined the 'empowering' rhetoric of transformation or makeover television, with the emphasis upon, and presumption of, the universal psychological subject which removes participating family members from the messiness of their material, everyday lives. The preference for talk of 'parenting' as a set of skills and competencies rather than talk of 'parents' as subjects already located within overlapping vectors of difference (gender, social class, race, marital status, sexuality, age and so on) contributes to this decontextualisation. The particular landscapes in which we live, and also the difference that space and place make to our lives, slip from view. In Chapters 7 and 8, I examine the affective encounters that parents had with the programme, but before moving analytically from the text to the audience encounter, I want to insert another analytic step, and examine the socio-cultural context and space in which parenting is done and lives are lived. As such I want to argue that the social subject is also a spatial subject.

I want to trouble the static concept of space that is employed within the programme and within parenting culture, through an examination of one particular neighbourhood; East Dulwich, an area in south-east London in the UK. As well as being 'my' neighbourhood, this area is also where my research participants live, and therefore the particularities of this

space – this parenting landscape – also informs Part 3 of the thesis. In spite of our geographical proximity, I felt during interviews with my participants that we experienced ‘our’ neighbourhood in sometimes similar, but often quite different, ways. I recruited the participants with whom I viewed the programme through locally run parenting activities and workshops, and invited participants to recruit their friends to sessions if they wished – who they usually knew through other parenting activities. The apparent ease with which they spoke of these social networks they had cultivated and the various activities they did with their children contrasted with my experiences of the area, which I sometimes felt excluded from, explicitly in terms of affordability and in more ambivalent ways in terms of entitlement and invitation. I will demonstrate in this chapter how East Dulwich can be seen as an example of neighbourhoods in which the tenets of intensive parenting/mothering (Hays, 1997) are realized, expressed and produced. I also want to complexify this realization, and point to some of the significant and subtle exclusions that happen within this landscape, both literally in terms of material resources and time, and psycho-spatially in terms of discourses around ‘people like us’. These questions have a particular salience within the wider cultural climate of individualisation in the UK, in which the effectiveness of one’s parenting, rather than social inequalities, is held to be morally accountable for the life chances, opportunities and aspirations of one’s children (Gillies, 2005; Skeggs, 2007; Lawler, 2005). I argue that, by paying careful attention to maternal landscapes – and by complexifying and troubling static notions of space – we can remain sensitive to the lived complexities of difference. Finally, and using ethnographic methods, I explore the ambivalences around being part of the neighbourhood and of being an ‘East Dulwich

mummy' and suggest how this might be interpreted through a lens of classed subjectivity and specifically middle-class anxiety.

Public space and queer feelings

Once a subject acquires the 'marks' of maternity – whether that is a pregnant body, a baby or a child – the ways in which that subject navigates through geographical spaces is transformed. Expectant mothers talk of experiencing their pregnant body as newly and unexpectedly 'public'; being stared at by strangers or hearing repeated requests to 'touch the bump' (Longhurst, 2000). In spite of many public campaigns to both improve breastfeeding rates amongst new mothers, and encourage mothers to breastfeed for longer, on the basis of the nutritional benefits, breastfeeding in public – and in private – continues to incur complex feelings of embarrassment, shame and anxiety. These feelings are classed and raced, and women feel differently able and competent with regards to breastfeeding as already raced and classed subjects, yet this remains unaddressed in breastfeeding campaign literature, which often assumes that what mothers need is simply 'more information' (Blum, 1999). Private bodies and public space remain, often, irreconcilable, such that the act of breastfeeding 'in the city' is imagined to create 'scandals' and that lactating breasts seem 'capable of transforming legislation, citizenship and cities themselves' (Bartlett, 2002: 111). How far this is true is up for debate, but it is important to note the ways in which

parenting practices such as breastfeeding have been taken up as spatial markers of well-being and deprivation. The Sure Start programme, introduced with the aim of targeting parenting support in neighbourhoods defined as 'socially excluded' and which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 9, determined its 'trailblazer' areas, announced in January 1999 (Glass, 2006) on the basis of 'deprivation indicators', including low breastfeeding rates. One of the central directives of Sure Start is to improve breastfeeding rates. Contradictory research findings regarding the breast versus bottle health benefits aside, it does seem fanciful to presume that any child will be able to suckle its way to social inclusion. This is just one of the ways that the material experiences of being a mother have been politicized and spatialised. Meanwhile, the pieces of parenting equipment and objects – buggies, bottles, bags, toys – which are sold to mothers on the promise of making childcare easier, more modern, more streamlined, often have the unintended consequence of creating a 'clumsy encumbrance' (Baraitser, 2009).

These examples – and many others – point to the ways in which maternal bodies can act as disruptions to the ordinary, invisible social processes through which bodies become enveloped within space. The unsettling moments, or what Sarah Ahmed (2005) calls 'queer feelings', bring to our attentions what otherwise might have passed by unnoticed, and suggests that the maternal subject must relearn what might have felt like previously familiar terrain. The changing body of the pregnant woman, and the small bodies she accumulates and must transport with her when her children are born, results in a changing relationship with the spaces she inhabits. Tasks and activities which might have been

achieved as if automatically – boarding a train, queuing in the supermarket, taking money from a cash dispenser – acquire new levels of complexity with a screaming toddler, breasts leaking milk, a pram overlaid with shopping bags and threatening to tip over. An entire genre of semi-autobiographical writing, ‘mummylit’¹, has emerged around the telling of these ontological changes of maternity and motherhood, the challenges around space and environment that these changes engender, the blushing frustrations and the queer feelings of navigating through these spaces as if a foreigner. The episode which occurs most consistently across different examples of mummylit is that of the public tantrum. The tantrum and what it represents – failure – has a cultural salience in terms of the knot of complex public space and encumbered maternal bodies produced within it. Writing about tantrums, Lisa Baraitser (2009) proposes we think of them as an eclipse of thought, a generative re-appearance, an excess of sensation – as all these things, for the child *and* for the mother witnessing it;

The excessiveness of the emotional display is deeply disturbing; when infants have tantrums, especially in public, it can induce in mothers a sense of shame, humiliation, rage, despair, hatred, anxiety, compassion, helplessness, disbelief, a dispassionate separateness, aggression, sadism, concern, boredom and distress. I suggest that the expressive force emanating from the toddler shakes us to our core and brings us back changed. (2009: 171, emphasis added)

¹ This being a variation on ‘chick lit’, a genre of confessional literature aimed at women, steeped in postfeminist irony and populated with sexually liberated, financially autonomous and usually badly behaved, ‘up for it’ career women. Other variations include ‘lad lit’ and ‘dad lit’; tagging ‘lit’ on to genres is also a cultural shorthand for trashy, light material, a diminutive form of ‘literature’.

The advice that is offered in the *Supernanny* programme is an attempt to manage this excessiveness, and through managing it, to neutralize the ways in which it disturbs and changes the mother. We can see how the programme partially addresses the queer feelings engendered through and in public space, visualising anew public space within a cultural landscape which has transformed intimacy and intimate space. As I explored in Chapter 2, first-person media confessionals, reality television and technologies of surveillance have troubled any tidy distinction between private and public worlds. In the foregrounding of high emotion, the everyday and 'ordinariness', these surveillant and intimate media precariously stage public space as private, private space as public (Moseley, 2000). *Supernanny* too is poised at the fault-lines of these blurred distinctions; offering up the claustrophobic interior of the family home as a site for emotional drama. In Chapter 5, I explored how, in its proffered solutions to these dramatic familial fissures, the programme decontextualises the gendered and generational power dynamics of family life and rewrites the family instead as a set of negotiated, elective and communicative 'pure relationships' (Giddens, 1991). This rewriting exists within a political context where talk of 'parents' has been replaced by discourses of 'parenting', which see parenting in terms of universal competencies and skills that all can learn. It is therefore necessary that the *Supernanny* lessons be learned by the nuclear family alone, and that the parameters of transformation are the four walls of the family home.

Just as the extended family and friends are silenced in the re-nuclearising of the *Supernanny* family (see Chapter 4), so too is the neighbourhood. Space outside of the family home become re-cast as a source of unease, anxiety, or sometimes even jeopardy. When nine-year-old Ben exits his house after breakfast and waits for his family, sitting on the kerb of a quiet suburban street, Frost insists to his harried mother that 'that child, that child is now in danger' (Series 2, Episode 1). The suburban street outside the family home is re-visualised at this and other points as dangerous rather than ordinary, whilst lingering footage upon the outside façade of the suburban family homes (and accompanying portentous music) hints at the domestic strife within. This re-visualisation is part of the interpretation by the programme of the family home as a site for the suburban 'uncanny' (Ferguson, 2009). This also echoes and reproduces cultural hysteria around 'stranger danger' and the figuring of public space as threatening for children.

Public spaces are also cast as dangerous, as potential sources of anxiety for parents, inasmuch as these spaces carry the threat of being shamed by the misbehaviour or acting out by children. Being 'out in public' is narrated as 'a disaster' (Season 4, Episode 2) time and time again; one's failure to control children is undeniable when it is witnessed by so many. Parents on the programme speak of 'shrinking', being 'mortified', 'dying of embarrassment'; some cope by staying inside as much as possible (Season 4, Episode 3), avoiding public places such as restaurants (Season 2, Episode 11) or cancelling family holidays (Season 5, Episode 4). *Supernanny* promise to demonstrate to parents how to use the behavioural and disciplinary techniques that will empower them and enable them to feel

in control, to occupy private and public space in newly authoritative ways. As I have discussed already in Chapters 4 and 5, these parenting advice texts rehearse a particular neo-liberal orientation towards parenting – one that is concerned with the management and cultivation of children, that is labour intensive and that can be broken down into a set of skills and competencies. In spatial terms, a kind of rationalist universal terrain is invoked, in which the public spaces we move through are considered to be the same and through which all parents are presumed to inhabit and move through in similar ways.

In this chapter, I take a critical approach to space, drawing on the work of Doreen Massey (1994) and Henri Lefebvre (1991) and arguing that space does not simply exist as a neutral backdrop upon which political and historical processes unfold. Space itself is socially produced; constructed through micro-political processes and the ways in which different bodies take up space and move through it. Lefebvre offers us a 'theory of moments', interweaving spatialities with the temporalities of everyday life and writing poetically of the place of the encounter, and of the assemblages of difference that are produced through these encounters. Places for Lefebvre are constructed through a complex interplay between perception, experience and imagination. I draw on these traditions in my own exploration of the parenting landscapes of my neighbourhood. In particular, I want to highlight what ethnographic methods can bring to an exploration of these spatial processes.

Drawing on theories around the production of neighbourhood, many geographers and spatial theorists agree that spaces of locality can be understood as both physical and social

spaces, involving both people and place. Ruth Lupton (2003) suggests that trying to disentangle physical and social causality effects of neighbourhood, between inhabitants and geography, is highly problematic. Neighbourhoods are, for Lupton and others, 'complex conceptualizations', simultaneously physical and social. The neighbourhood, as a 'bundle of spatially-based attributes' (Galster, 2001) is not fixed or independent of the people that live there. Neighbourhoods are dynamic, continually re-made as fluxes of inhabitants move in and out of them, contest and transform their meanings and identities. Doreen Massey (1994) argues that neighbourhoods are not simply containers in which social interactions take place. Rather, she suggests we view them as overlapping sets of social networks, which might include different ranges of activities and distances for different people. In Massey's work, spaces do not have a consistent or static meaning, but multiple sets of meanings, dynamic, re-interpretable and fluid².

The foundationality of subjective experience is therefore crucial when thinking about the ways in which inhabitants, who may share physical geography, experience 'their' space.

Over time, different places accumulate cultural markers and reputations, they come to be

² This also draws attention to important debates around how we might divide space up into meaningful units of analysis, and where to draw the boundaries of neighbourhood. McCulloch and Joshi (2000) point out that the boundary markings of political or electoral wards are quite arbitrary, and Macallister (2001) drew up more sophisticated 'bespoke' neighbourhoods in which subject within them is granted the central position in a radius emanating from his home. Any of these divisions is problematic in terms of capturing the differential spatial experiences of different subjects; 'neighbourhood' is no even matter. Lupton points out that the experience of neighbourhood may change at different points in the life-course, personal circumstances and so on. Many of the mothers I interviewed felt newly integrated in their neighbourhoods once their children began attending (local) primary school, for example. Whilst acknowledging the fluidity of 'neighbourhood', for the purposes of this chapter, I pragmatically define the neighbourhood of East Dulwich by its SE22 London postcode.

represented within public discourse in particular ways; in other words, places acquire a 'symbolic shape' (Paasi, 1991). Thinking in terms of the subjective experience of place requires us to ask questions of a psychosocial flavour, in terms of the 'degree of fit' that is felt by inhabitants of particular places, the degree to which they self-identify with their neighbourhood, and how far they relate to the meanings that have become associated with it.

Psychosocial questions around space and self-identity also require us to think critically about the exclusions that happen – that must happen – in the social production of space. For, in order to produce a coherent, if at times ambivalent, sense of place, the processes of classification and importantly social distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) are employed in productive ways. Although these exclusions may be muted, glossed over or otherwise hushed, they are nonetheless present. In order to produce a sense of who one *is*, through reference to *where one lives*, one must also gesture to who one *is not*, where one *does not live*, or the people who do not live in the same place as you. As highly desirable areas become more expensive, the 'zone of desirability' is extended through references to particular streets, developments and areas in a game of place-association and connotation³.

³ Thus a set of roads that fall within the boundary of Peckham has been renamed 'Peckham Village', and its proximity to a road of boutique stores is emphasized over its proximity to Peckham High Street. These kind of association games are perhaps just part of the lexicon of desirability that property developers and estate agents speak in, but they have real effects in terms of the ways in which people make sense of the proximity of their neighbourhoods to both zones of desirability and less desirable zones.

The symbolic shape of SE22

East Dulwich is the eastern part of the district of Dulwich, an area in the borough of Southwark in South London. Dulwich follows the classic rules of Victorian suburbanisation; what was once farming land was developed in a short space of time in the mid-nineteenth century, providing homes for the City workers and clerks of central London. Reliable rail-links to the centre and the generously-sized Victorian terrace houses made it a popular choice for young families headed by fathers who worked in clerical positions in the City, whilst the green buffers provided by Dulwich Park and Peckham Rye park meant that it quickly reached its development capacity. Journalists concerned with the property market have pointed out how the hierarchy of the market follows geographical contours, with areas at the top of hills, near the greenest and largest parks or along reliable Tube lines being the most desirable and expensive to live in (McGhie, 1994). McGhie cautiously described East Dulwich as 'up-and-coming' in 1994 – a place 'soaking up' the middle-classes who could not quite afford Dulwich Village⁴ – and barely a decade on (when I arrived) the gentrification of the area seemed cemented.

When examining East Dulwich, it is important to contextualize it in relation to the wider politics of residence in the city of London, and in urban spaces generally. Spatial theorists and geographers have identified patterns of residency, whereby London working-class

⁴ An even more exclusive and expensive district to the west, with a well-established private school system and known locally as 'The Village'.

families who were social housing tenants are gradually displaced from the centre of the city and from more desirable neighbourhoods, due to middle-class gentrification. Some theorists have interpreted these processes in terms of positive social change, replacement rather than displacement and the re-invigoration of inner city areas (Hamnett, 2003).

Others have interpreted gentrification processes as indications of widening class polarization (Smith, 1996) and argued that displacement through gentrification is a neighbourhood expression of class inequality (Slater, 2009). The ways in which gentrification acts as a class-making process is evident across a variety of texts, which seek to promote and celebrate the neighbourhood's capacity to support a middle-class urban lifestyle, as this following quote from another property journalist illustrates:

People in East Dulwich are living the dream of every lifestyle TV show. They shop in delis, eat and drink in gastro-pubs and redecorate their Victorian homes at the weekend. If they're lucky, they send their children to good schools, make fat profits from selling their homes, and move to somewhere with a Tube.

Sandwiched between Peckham (bad) and Dulwich Village (good), East Dulwich is the real thing, a genuinely up-and-coming area. And it isn't estate-agent hype — semis that were worth less than £100,000 in the mid-1990s now sell for £400,000. There are still two faces of East Dulwich. Old East Dulwich is slightly rough, very poor, and resolutely unfashionable. New East Dulwich is young, happening and a fantastic place to buy free-range children's clothes. But however far the area has come, it still fails the Fried Chicken

Test. There are at least three fried chicken shops in East Dulwich, so it's still officially 'edgy' (Whitwell, 2004).

Whitwell laments the Sainsbury's on Dog Kennel Hill – 'if only it could magically turn into a Waitrose, the area would truly have arrived'. I recorded some local gossip about the Iceland store on Lordship Lane – a supermarket specializing in freezer food and routinely denigrated as cheap, tasteless and without class⁵ – becoming a Marks and Spencer, a chain at the high-end of the quality continuum. It never materialized. North Cross Road, a tributary road leading east off of Lordship Lane, hosts a market from Thursday to Saturday, but Whitwell warns, it is 'not what you might expect from a South London street market. Instead of flammable underwear and knock-down DVDs, you'll find handpainted reclaimed furniture, home-made bread and suede slippers'. Another journalist admits that, though there are still a few signs of 'the rougher East Dulwich of the past', the jumbo buggies, chi-chi shops and lively market 'make the area feel incredibly safe and friendly, with an overwhelming sense of community', the 'desirable enclave' for young (middle-class) families. In my fieldnotes, I recorded moments of disdain for the pockets of social housing and the people within them, such as the neighbor who complained that his garden view was being obstructed by an extension to one block, remarking that the 'council blocks are like a fungus'. These statements are saturated with classed judgements around taste, dirt, contagion and value.

⁵ As if any further classed connotations were needed, Iceland is also endorsed by the original 'Pramface', pop-singer-turned-reality-TV-star, Kerry Katona (see McRobbie, 2004 and Tyler, 2008).

Places are made through social, cultural and economic processes. Property pages and local magazines celebrate the success of East Dulwich's transformation from a 'rough' (working-class) neighbourhood to a desirable enclave. New technologies of spatial sorting do similar place-making work, for example the website upmystreet.com which offers localized knowledges about the kinds of neighbours one is likely to find in particular postcodes; promising details such as what newspapers they read, where they tend to holiday or how many are connected to satellite television. The postcode-sorting programme Mosaic, designed by Richard Webber, offers lifestyle and identity categories on the basis of postcode categories such as the burdened optimist or the urban intelligent; these spatial knowledges are used to produce targeted advertising. These texts and processes are deeply classed: East Dulwich has become a successful middle-class enclave by defining itself as not rough, not working-class, but cosmopolitan, elegant and ordered. In their interviews with middle-class South London inhabitants, Tim Butler and Gary Robson (2001) demonstrate how formerly deprived of 'undesirable' areas are transformed and 'made congenial to the requirements of middle-class life' (2000: 2). In this way, they argue, a cognitive map of the locality is produced, a map that is both psychological and social; keeping the chaotic 'there' away from the ordered 'here'.

These cognitive maps are racialised as well as classed; talk about place is often coded shorthand for talk about race (Keith, 2005). Butler and Robson point to the pragmatic importance attached to some kinds of diversity over others; in particular the value attached by middle-class participants in Brixton to the 'cultural mix' of their locality. References to

this diversity enabled these participants to articulate themselves as culturally omnivorous metropolitans, although as Butler and Robson point out, there were important gulfs between these claims to cosmopolitanism and their actual social networks and connections. They suggest that the social interaction of Brixton might be best termed 'tectonic' – that is, as parallel rather than integrative. The importance attached to the neighbourhood by the parents of East Dulwich, who participated in interview sessions, contributed to local discussion forums and wrote in the magazines and brochures, was *less* concerned with the diversity of encounters that metropolitan living might open up, and *more* concerned with the opportunities for concerted cultivation that they could direct their children towards, and of the development of communities and networks that were productive in terms of being a metropolitan parent. In her research on the ways in which space and place becomes racialised, Bridget Byrne (2006) argues that these racialised geographies intersect with class in complex ways, which often permit (middle-class) whiteness to become invisible and unmarked.

There was a good deal of spatial talk around social class and race in interview sessions with my participants, referring to other areas of proximity around which very careful boundaries were drawn with East Dulwich. One particular area was the neighbouring district of Peckham, which has acquired pockets of gentrification but is generally a much more racially mixed area with established Afro-Caribbean and Turkish communities. It is also an area with something of a negative reputation, and has been a national shorthand, along with Brixton in the borough of Lambeth, for inner-city street violence. In April 2008, local MP

Harriet Harman was criticized by journalists and community leaders for wearing a stab-proof vest when visiting her constituency in Peckham⁶. Talking about 'Peckham' became at times shorthand for talking about blackness. One of my white respondents spoke of her concerns about which school her son would end up going to; she anticipated the problems if he were to attend a 'Peckham' school, not in terms of the quality of the school but in racial terms, in that he would be racially 'outnumbered'.

I was interested in examining how East Dulwich is produced as a parenting space, promoted and made coherent by those who live and move within it, those who conduct business, sell products and offer services, through a range of magazines and brochures distributed in the area. Some of these magazines position themselves as specific to the immediate locale – *Dulwich Living*, or one simply called SE22 (the neighbourhood postcode) – others are aimed at areas south of the River Thames – *Living South*, *Families* and *South-East Parenting* – whilst yet more are produced for parents across the entire city of London – *angels&urchins* in particular. The range of magazines beckon parents in a range of concentric territories, proximities and identifications; as an urban, metropolitan or cosmopolitan parent, playing on the North/South loyalties in the city, and through more local invitations to the immediate neighbourhood. I approach these texts as illustrations of the place-connotations that East Dulwich specifically has acquired over time, as well as indications of the ways in

⁶ The previous month, then-Home Secretary Jacqui Smith admitted publicly she was afraid to walk alone at night. She attempted to retract the statement by detailing how she bought a nocturnal kebab in Peckham, but this too backfired when it emerged that she had been accompanied by a Special Branch protection officer. In both instances, it is the unspoken associations that circulate around Peckham – dangerous, criminal, 'edgy' – that make these events newsworthy.

which other middle-class satellite metropolitan areas are invoked. *South-East Parenting* for example is a lifestyle magazine for, we would presume, parents in South East London; however, the neighbourhoods that warrant feature articles are predominantly white, middle-class areas (districts such as Blackheath, Clapham, Greenwich). Great swathes of south-east London – districts that are more ethnically and socially mixed, such as Peckham, Deptford and Lewisham – are simply absent from these magazines and brochures. In terms of physical geography, the featured spaces are constituted of desirable family-sized houses, built around green spaces; but in terms of a symbolic classed and raced imaginary, they might also be read as significations of a morally desirable landscape of attentive, intensive parenting.

Butler and Robson argue that the middle-classes must increasingly consolidate their social capital in relation to their leisure and family activities and practices. The local public sphere, incorporating places such as the primary school, the community centre and the park, is a space where social capital can be successfully pooled and deployed. The primary school in particular emerged as highly significant in the interviews they conducted, and this was very resonant with what I found. Many of the parents I spoke to spoke of feeling newly integrated with their locality through their children's schooling; this is not surprising, in light of the central place of education within contemporary configurations of class and capital. Through the consolidation of this social capital, the urban middle-classes are becoming classed agents; in the words of Butler and Robson, 'a class for itself',

experiencing class consciousness in the Marxist sense, operating in their own interests and reproducing their very middle-classness through the localized public sphere.

I want now to consider the ways parents navigate through this neighbourhood, through the vectors of difference. In her ethnography of a group of working-class women completing their training in the caring professions, Bev Skeggs (1997) argued that their talk was saturated with the awareness of their visibility, in how they were being constantly judged and evaluated by others. My interest in this chapter is in whether this visibility is experienced evenly; how do vectors of difference, gender, social class, race, age, impact upon the feelings of being scrutinised, or of feeling invited, as a parent? What happens when we think about these landscapes and the difficult emotions we are faced with when we move through them, not as evidence of a need for mantras of empowerment or training in occupying space with authority, but as marks of the burdens of class, race and gender that we need to attend to? What happens when we reinstate 'queer feelings' – discomfort, embarrassment, shame, a feeling of not quite fitting, or the emotional excessiveness of a public tantrum – within a wider project of attentiveness to the micro-politics of exclusion?

'Speaking as a researcher', visual notebooks and ethnographic methods

As I have discussed, I used a variety of ethnographic methods to explore how the 'symbolic shape' of this neighbourhood is produced. Ethnographic fieldwork is not 'scientific' in any conventional way; as an ethnographer I am documenting my highly subjective experiences and moments and retelling them in a way that meaningfully conveys my sense of the space. What ethnography can do is provide the 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of space and place and of the ethnographer moving through it. My fieldnotes included vignettes, gossip, encounters, alongside the more structured sessions viewing parenting advice that I held with participating parents (discussed in Chapters 7 and 8). Looking at this material through a spatial lens presents me with new challenges, but importantly it also presents me with new opportunities for making sense of myself as a researcher within these spaces, and for unpicking the various and complex ways in which I was read during fieldwork; as a possible source of publicity, a potential shoplifter, a tourist.

In Chapter 3, I explored issues of objectivity in social and cultural research, and of my desire not to silence my 'looming presence', but rather to take account of the centrality of my self and my subjecthood in the parameters of this research. I would always be speaking from somewhere, specifically 'speaking as a mother' (Jensen, 2008) and my initial (thwarted) methodological forays into ethnography served as important reminders of the ways in which I, like my research participants watching *Supernanny*, like the families

appearing on *Supernanny*, am enveloped and invested within discourses of 'good parenting'. Karen Throsby and Debra Gimlin (2009) indicate the inescapability, even through criticism, of these investments; they wanted both to 'critique thinness' and to 'be thin', just as I wanted to both critique the orthodoxies of 'good parenting' and 'be a good parent'.

The ways in which I was read and interpreted during ethnographic fieldwork was not straightforward; if I had no child with me, I was not interpreted as a mother at all. I began to take my daughter with me on ethnographic visits as an alibi and my relationship with the spaces was altered by her presence. I began using a camera as a visual notebook in order to document this parental gentrification of the neighbourhood. The process of using a camera as a visual notebook opened up important questions about the comfort and entitlement I felt to these spaces, and provided me with new kinds of challenges regarding the spatial politics of the neighbourhood. Some of these questions were ethical and regarded consent – for example, I endeavoured not to take recognisable portraits of people. Other moments however provoked difficult feelings for me as a subject who lived within the neighbourhood and had an ambivalent relationship with it. The roads I walked along and the places I entered were not new to me; many of them I had ventured into several times before, and some I travelled through daily. But the confidence I felt 'as a researcher' was new; I felt an entitlement to these spaces that I had not always felt, and looked at them through new eyes. I was struck by the veneer of professionalism I was able to employ through photography and through my proclaimed status as 'researcher'.

At other times, the entitlement that my camera gave me was less secure. In a childrens' toy and clothing shop on the same stretch of road, my request to take photographs inside the shop was dismissed, and my revised request to photograph just the (public) noticeboard by the entrance was hotly discussed by the staff before being reluctantly granted. I resolved, in the absence of visual notes, to be satisfied with written ones. The manager of the shop proceeded to follow me around like a shadow as I made my notes; I felt distinctly uncomfortable, as if I was a shoplifter who was not to be trusted. The episode brought up the 'queer feelings' of being a working-class woman entering a high-end and expensive boutique store; of not fitting in, of not being appropriately attired for the establishment, of feeling 'trashy', unkempt and unrespectable (Skeggs, 1997). I attempted to regain control of the situation by continuously asking how much different pieces of merchandise were, and then tutting under my breath at her answer and noting the prices down in my notebook. This felt like a symbolic revenge of sorts, as if I was hinting at the outraged anti-publicity I was going to produce in my write-up of the shop; nonetheless I left feeling ashamed and vaguely guilty.

The experience of being refused permission to take photographs inside many of these shops highlighted the sometimes contradictory moments of unease, invitation, beckoning and exclusion that are prompted by this landscape and which I must negotiate as a maternal flaneur. The photographs I have taken of the front windows of these shops, displaying the expensive and exclusive products and toys that are celebrated across promotional texts of the area and yet are not evenly accessible or affordable, articulate something of my

experience of these spaces. The window displays, offering the promise of a morally sound consumption, yet held behind glass and unreachable, highlighted the uneven-ness of this parenting terrain. These parenting spaces and the social networks they appeared to promise, like the toys of the window, felt at times as unattainable to me as objects in a glass case at a museum (See Figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 and 3: Shopfronts on Lordship Lane, East Dulwich



Walking ethnography

On one of my early walks I entered The Plough, a local public house which was refurbished in 2007. Prior to this, it had been a dark, quiet pub, a 'the local boozer', populated in the day by older retired men and in the evening by a younger working-class clientele. When the pub was re-opened, the transformation was startling. As well as a huge structural renovation – the bar, once taking up the back wall, now jutted out through the centre of pub, effectively dividing it into two large rooms - the pub had also been reinvented as a desirable family space. An ambitious menu, blackboards detailing the organic, freshly pressed juices and a range of European beers on offer announced the reinvention of The Plough as a newly gentrified landmark of East Dulwich, whilst the separate children's menu and a cabinet full of children's toys and games announced the efforts of the new management to create a family-friendly place.

I sought permission from staff to take some photographs of a table and noticeboard displaying pamphlets and flyers for various parenting activities and services in the area. As I was taking photographs, the manager, interested in what I was doing, approached me and helpfully informed me, with some pride, that he also hosted a weekly parent's group. He seemed keen to tell me how popular it was, and offered his weekly attendance numbers, the number of parents he had on the database, as well as listing the kinds of visitors and speakers he arranged to visit the group; independent midwives, speech therapists, local businesses. I was delighted to have provoked his enthusiastic speech, I also felt that he had mistook me, or rather mistaken my research for potential 'publicity'.

I revisited these experiences with Jessica. Jessica moved to East Dulwich six weeks prior to our walk. Although it not an entirely new area for her, since she grew up in Camberwell (less than a mile north) and was familiar with the area before she moved there, she stated that it felt 'very different' from other parts of Southwark. Jessica was also heavily pregnant with her first child at the time of our walk. It was these two aspects of her life – her recent move and her forthcoming birth – that I felt would be particularly salient in documenting and revisiting the meanings and associations of a space which was self-consciously a parenting space, and it was for these reasons that I was keen to revisit the area with her. Revisiting with Jessica offered, literally, a new pair of eyes.

Jessica and I met at a café which promoted its family-friendly credentials to customers before they entered – a sign on the door proclaiming 'we welcome children – and their (well-behaved) parents'. When planning our meet by email, Jessica had told me that she had recently been in this particular café and realized that she was the only customer without a small child with her; although she felt that her pregnancy bump had afforded her the 'right' to be there. Within minutes of our meeting, a woman pushing her buggy through the door struck up a conversation with us, asking Jessica how long she had to 'go'.

Jessica spoke of the 'differences' she had noted since moving, comparing East Dulwich to her native Camberwell. Initially, she articulated these differences as a 'feeling', in terms of the leisured pace of the area which she experienced as comforting; subsequently voicing differences in terms of economic and demographic differences, noting how 'white' East

Dulwich is compared to neighbouring Camberwell – something she feels ‘uncomfortable’ with – and how wealthy. Jessica’s illustrates this wealth by asking how much affluence must be necessary to support the many local cafés and restaurants.

Throughout our walk, Jessica demonstrated her ambivalent relationship with the area. She had a particular vision of what it was to be an East Dulwich parent, and whilst she wanted to put some distance between that and herself, she struggled to admit that she probably did fit the demographic in many ways.

Jim and I end up talking about it in a kind of snide way, with a bit of superiority, like...we’re not *proper* East Dulwich parents – we’re just here temporarily! We don’t really *belong*. But then, Jim was talking to me the other day and he was like. ‘You know. I’ve been thinking about it. And actually. We *are* East Dulwich. You work in a slightly creative industry. I’m a civil servant. You went to school round there.’ You know. We’re kind of interesting but not too interesting. We earn enough money but not so much money that we’re in, like, Chiswick. We’re having our first baby in our late twenties. We tick every box. We *are* one of those people. However much we hate to admit it, we *are* [*laughter*].

As pushchair after pushchair passed us, Jessica pointed out how bulky and impractical she felt many of them were; she has recently made her pushchair purchase and was surprised by

how expensive the top-range ones can be⁷. She also noted how prevalent the top-range versions are in East Dulwich, whispering to me each time one passed. As we walked the area and visited several shops selling a range of parenting goods, Jessica pointed out the expense of many of the products on offer, and the redundancy of some of them. Browsing the pushchairs, we examined what accessories were included in the price, and it was proved to be little. Although our visits to these shops were in the same critical vein as my solo forays – where I had felt under surveillance as a potential shoplifter – and although we shared our critical orientation, we nonetheless conducted our outraged price comparisons in hushed voices. It was as if, despite our mutual evaluation of these excess prices, we were mindful of standing out as anything but potential customers.

Jessica's hesitant positioning of herself and her husband as 'those people', as East Dulwich parents, a positioning she seems to want to refuse even as she reluctantly acknowledges it, speaks of the precariousness with which these classed and raced spatialising processes are lived. Both Jessica and I live in a wealthy, privileged neighbourhood, which has gentrified in ways that offer, or will offer, particular advantages to us as parents: our conversation was saturated with unease about embracing the accompanying spatial and social identities, even resisting them, and by speaking nostalgically (and guiltily) of the places we have left behind and moved away from. We drew attention in our conversation several times to how white and how middle-class this neighbourhood that we live in, as if by recognizing it and acknowledging it, we might neutralize our own whiteness and our own (precarious,

⁷ The Bugaboo pushchair, a particularly fashionable model made popular as the accessory of choice for several celebrity mothers, retails at between six and nine hundred pounds.

unwanted, ambivalent?) middle-class position and privilege. Similarly, by drawing attention to one another of the expense, the decadence and the absurdity of different parenting goods and products available in these boutique stores, we might be able to displace our own desires for them. After our walk, Jessica took me to her flat, where she showed me her own stockpile of baby gear. Veering between knowing self-deprecation at our own failures to resist the allure of these goods, and guilty confessions about intentions to make yet more purchases, is perhaps one important strategy for mothers that are caught within complicated webs of irony and consumerism. I discuss the kinds of obligatory humour that the postfeminist maternal subject performs in more detail in Chapter 8; now I want to turn to the ways in which the process of making spatial and social value through parenting is precarious.

The reproduction of anxiety

The classed resonances of desirable parenting practices (and, of course, products) are replicated throughout the magazines, brochures, pamphlets and flyers of local businesses and services. The importance of purchasing the right parenting products is articulated through discursive vocabularies of style, chicness, environmentalism, the authentic and the traditional. One local magazine offers an entire feature about how to 'picnic' stylishly:

A pared-down picnic is the way forward, go for stylishly simple. Nothing says 'uncool' louder than a cooler box and Tupperware tasting tidbits and a stewed brew from a thermos are no one's cup of tea. For the perfect family picnic forget the plastic accoutrements and the hours of preparation, put the ingredients in a basket and get going.

'A get up and go family picnic' by Laurence Roullier White in Dulwich Living,
July/August 2008

These intertwined vocabularies of style and environmentalism, of purchasing the expensive, the exclusive and the ethical, invokes and invites judgements of those that do not adhere to the rules. As well as the products and services available to the discerning local parent, the parenting landscape emerges through a wide range of activities for parents and children, including sign language for babies, conga classes for new mums, 'powerpramming' (outdoors fitness class incorporating pushchairs, see Figure 4), yoga for children, drama classes, art classes, life coaching for working parents, decluttering services for children's bedrooms, and so on. Paying attention to the brochures, pamphlets and flyers that are present in places throughout the area – in bars, cafes and shops – and that together work to produce a particular parenting terrain. The range of services, goods, and activities aimed specifically at parents and their children is absolutely huge, and that many places carried pamphlet stands and/or notice boards that were completely covered.



Figure 4: Producing a 'yummy mummy' body as leisure

In many ways this landscape operates through the logic of 'intensive parenting' (Hays, 1996) in which parents are required to be the managers of their children's lives, cultivating skills and opportunities, assessing their needs and competencies according to developmental models of childrearing, and of course meeting the financial costs of this cultivation. These noticeboards, pamphlet stands and brochure tables were ever-present in the public spaces of East Dulwich, and every shop pertaining to parenting carried their own configuration of these leaflets. For the impression these photographs give of the buzzing variety of activities, it is important to note that *none* of those on display were free or subsidised. In order to do this kind of metropolitan intensive parenting, one needs considerable resources in terms of money and time. For parents that cannot afford these, any subsidized or free activities on offer such as toy libraries and toddler groups are simply not present on these boards. This is a resolutely middle-class landscape (see Figures 5).



Figure 5: One of the public noticeboards displaying a range of local parenting services.

There were moments in sessions with respondents when something was conveyed of the labour that went into the production of these parental spaces and the cultivation of these networks and the anxiety that came out. Although there were many moments when respondents spoke positively of all that was on offer in the area, particularly in terms of developing new social networks and communities, there were also moments when they spoke more ambivalently about the feelings of scrutiny that these maternal geographies opened up.

One thing that I've noticed – and I am still new to mummydom – is all this *judgement*. I mean, its everywhere. Everywhere I go with him, all these activities. Everywhere.

[Louisa, in interview]

I was just thinking, oh god, *please* don't say that so loudly in the playground, that I let you play computer games when we get in from school!

[Kelly, in the playground]

Doing the very kind of intensive parenting that was encouraged by the parental geography of East Dulwich was fraught with complexity. How many activities were too many activities? What *kind* of mother overburdens her child with a social life that's too hectic? Acquaintances confided these anxieties to me in passing, but with a frequency that marked them as significant;

You know, am I one of those parents, those pushy parents, you know, who rushes their kids to all these millions of activities. What's it called? Hyperparent!

[Mother of four]

I think we might have to drop an activity. Thursdays are good for us. But we do have a lot on at the moment. The social whirl of being five! It wasn't like this for me when I was little.

[Mother of two, on trying to find a day for her daughter to come for tea]

'We welcome children' and its limits

Far from being a landscape that is impossible, or at least difficult, for parents to navigate through, East Dulwich emerges as a potential space for comfort for (some) parents. I do not want to be pessimistic about the production of a space in which children and families are welcome, in which mothers are not isolated, and where a range of social activities enable them to become embedded within networks of neighbours and acquaintances. However, it is important to note that these spatial processes are not even, nor are they inclusive. The cultivation of social networks through the many activities on offer in the neighbourhood, the frequenting of spaces that made a concerted effort to attract the more leisured class of mother as a ritual of sociability marks it as 'different' from bordering neighbourhoods. But this comfort is not universal or even and the class politics of entitlement and inclusion play out within these spaces. Moreover, the positive moral value attached to this intensive parenting terrain can only be secured through the symbolic distancing of other parents, other families, other children. In the 'popular cultural cartography' (Haylett, 2000) of gentrification and desirability, the 'Hampstead of the South' emerges as the white, middle-class tectonically-metropolitan next-door neighbour of spaces such as (rough, working-class, black, undesirable) Peckham that are coded as not only less desirable but also populated by the less desirable.

Even within the borders of desirability, I encountered some of the ambivalences around the parental gentrification of East Dulwich. One of the effects of all the dense clustering of

leisured motherhood in the area (what are often referred to in the popular imaginary as 'yummy mummies') is that many of the bars and pubs have made various kinds of effort to invite families into their establishments. This not only means providing a children's menu, together with the associated accoutrements of day-glow cutlery, cups and plates, but also in some cases, toys, books and games. Enter some of the newer bars along the main road, and you are also likely to step onto a jigsaw foam floor and find the widescreen television switched to the CBeebies channel.

The importance of doing this on quiet weekdays as a way of bringing new customers in to spend money is clear, but this 'families welcome' policy has in some cases had unintended consequences. Some of the bars have acquired poor reputations amongst their childless patrons who report bitterly that there is now no peaceful time-slot. Meanwhile, an experiment in providing hot drinks and snacks in the back room of a gift shop on North Cross Road had to be terminated, because some mothers were allegedly allowing their children to 'run riot' whilst they chatted peacefully over coffee.

The ambivalent limits of the "we welcome children" policy that many shops in East Dulwich became particularly apparent to me in one of the many toy shops of the area. Amongst the products available in this shop are a number of children's pedal-cars and tricycles. When I moved to the area and first visited the shop with my then-two year old daughter, these pedal-cars were lined up on the shop-floor, with a prominent sign indicating that they were not to be touched or ridden. The difficulties of preventing small children from climbing in

these welcoming toys can be easily imagined, and in each visit I, along with other parents, became frequently embroiled in passionate arguments with our children who could not understand why they could not play with these toys. When I visit now, I notice that the pedal-cars are displayed above the merchandise shelves; despite being childrens' toys, they are unavailable to children visiting the shop (See Figure 6). An example of a train set that is available for purchase remains set up on a table on the shop floor, but the accompanying toy trains, that used to be a welcome source of amusement for visiting children, have now been removed.



Figure 6: Look, but don't touch

Clearly, the production and promotion of East Dulwich – and of other satellite areas – as a family friendly and child-welcoming neighbourhood held a good deal of positive value for the mothers who live there and participated in the research, and many used the activities on offer to develop social networks. Their maternal geographies were opened up by the childfriendly policies of many of these spaces, and several of the participants spoke of

feeling less isolated and more integrated as a result of them. But we should not I think lose sight of the subtle exclusions that operate, both in terms of promotional material that concentrates on specific white, middle-class areas and reproduces only their desirability, and the moments of discomfort and shame that operate in everyday encounters. Using ethnographic methods, including field diaries, photography and walking ethnography, are methods which I have used to begin to document my relationship to this space and to attempt to insert a sense of these landscapes into the universal subject of parenting advice. I pick up these themes in the following two chapters, in which I explore the affective encounters with *Supernanny* and the relationships to parenting advice experienced by parents who live in East Dulwich and who are, to complex degrees of comfort or dis-ease, 'East Dulwich parents'.

Chapter 7 – ‘Come on then, give us the tears’; assessing, critiquing and refusing *Supernanny*

The first time I ever watched the hit UK TV series *Supernanny*, I spent the entire hour shouting at the TV. Who did this woman think she was, barging into complete strangers’ lives, bossing them around, patronising them, talking about them behind their backs to an audience of millions? And who were these people, who asked this woman into their homes, presented themselves for verbal castration, and embraced the humiliation of exposing the chaos of their private space? [...]

The second time I watched *Supernanny*, I cried. [...] What upset me the most was that this time, I felt I understood its appeal. Who invited Supernanny home? We did. Why?

Because we feel so inadequate as parents

Jennie Bristow, 2009: 11

What does the visualisation of good and bad parenting within *Supernanny* do to, and for, parents watching the programme? What effect does the narrative of empowerment and transformation have for viewers? How do parents respond to and engage with the tenets of parenting philosophy that are presented in the programme, and beyond? Do parents speak with the agony of recognition, with criticism, or with judgement and moral outrage at the parents in the programme? In her book, from which the above quote is taken, journalist Jennie Bristow carefully picks apart the nuances of contemporary parenting culture, which she argues is contributing to a generalised and intensive anxiety about childrearing. This

anxiety has, for Bristow, the dual effect of both undermining parents' confidence in their ability to parent, whilst simultaneously holding parents responsible for every aspect of their child's futurity. This parenting culture, in her words, 'sets expectations that are both unreasonably high, and insultingly low' (2009: 17). How, then, do viewers of the programme make sense of themselves, as parents, through viewing? Does the programme speak to them of the unreasonable demands they feel put upon them as parents, or do they feel insulted by the advice offered? Do they identify with those on the screen, or do they hold them at a distance? Writing of her own experiences of the programme, Bristow oscillates between 'them' – 'who were these people' – the on-screen parents that have invited Supernanny home, that Bristow feels both pity and anger towards, and 'us', the parents that feel inadequate, the realisation of which makes her weep. What Bristow does not interrogate is the ways in which both her anger – at 'these people', the parents on the screen, at 'this woman', the Supernanny Jo Frost, and her sadness – at the realisation that 'we' feel inadequate as parents – are constitutive of her very identity as a parent who is 'standing up to Supernanny'. It is towards this oscillation between 'them on the screen' and 'us on the sofa', and the place it plays in producing parental identities, that I want to attend to in this chapter; the ways in which participating parents tried to create the reassurances of a barrier between sofa and screen, and how they tried to reconcile ourselves with the possibility of a more permeable and more troubling fluidity with 'them on the screen'.

Towards a damp sociology

This chapter and the next are concerned with encounters between the *Supernanny* programme and parents that watch it. We might ask, why are people watching programmes such as *Supernanny*? In an attempt to answer this very question, Ipsos MORI conducted a survey about parenting advice on television with parents¹. This report found that huge numbers of the population were tuning in to parenting television shows, 'with *Supernanny* emerging as a clear winner', watched by 42% of all adults. Many parents reported that they were putting into practice the parenting techniques suggested by these programmes, that the programmes served as reassuring comparisons to their own family lives and that they welcomed the suggestions made; although the survey also found that "sizeable minorities" of respondents expressed their uncertainties about the advice, or concern for the welfare of the participating children. The report concluded that those producing and commissioning such programmes have a responsibility towards an entire generation of adults, suggesting perhaps a return to the ethics of public service broadcasting, with an emphasis on education.

What the report does not begin to examine is the ways in which parenting programmes act as a significant site for the production of parental selves. As I suggested in Chapter 1, many

¹ For a full report of the poll, conducted on behalf of the National Family and Parenting Institute see <http://www.familyandparenting.org/item/1284>

accounts of the history of parenting advice presume a kind of static parent who is able to exercise agency and choose freely between different parenting philosophies. The MORI survey relies on a similarly static model of the parents who were polled, without exploring how the encounters with the programmes might be fraught, complex and troubling. In a broad sense, the Ipsos MORI survey might be a useful exploratory tool, mapping viewer preferences by demographic for example. Nonetheless, it presumes that the parents viewing programmes such as *Supernanny* have a rational, cognitive and clean response, and that these responses can be excavated by researchers armed with a set of questions. I have explored some of the problems with these methods in Chapter 3; namely, that they replicate notions about a particular ideal respondent and that they isolate the viewer preferences from the rich and complex moments of viewing. I want to unpick the meanings of preferences that viewers might *report* to a survey or poll, and explore in more detail the actual encounter they have during viewing itself, in order to think about the ways in which these preferences and encounters might be thought of as constitutive spaces through which parental identities are formed.

This chapter explores, in more depth than the Ipsos MORI poll can, the relationships between the parental identities formed through the experience of viewing *Supernanny* and the networks of meanings that are circulated through the content and technologies of the programmes themselves. I interviewed parents about their experiences of and relationship with contemporary parenting advice – specifically the genre of parenting television – and I then watched an episode of *Supernanny* with them. My intention has been to map in more

complex ways how parents relate to parenting television and its tenets, and the kinds of identity statements that are occasioned by these narratives. This mapping, I would suggest, attends to the ways in which watching *Supernanny* is not simply a matter of 'eyes and ears' (see Chapter 3), but involved investments, emotion, affect, loyalties and performance. In this chapter and the next, I attempt a kind of 'damp sociology' (Munt, 2007) in which I pay attention to the complex affectivity of watching parenting television for parents.

I argue that the parental encounters with these programmes were not simply rational and cognitive, but rather were bodily, emotional and affective. The parents who participated laughed and gasped with the horror of recognition; moaned, groaned and sighed in sympathy with the spectacle of weeping parents; tutted and shook their heads in disbelief at the conduct of the families on the television screen. There was a great deal of mobility, in terms of identification and dis-identification with different characters on the screen, and over the course of the narrative. Moreover, the emotionally rich texture of these viewing encounters complicated - and often contradicted - the diplomatic and considered narratives of their own parenting that they offered during the interviews before.

Why are parents watching *Supernanny*? The answers, as I demonstrate in this chapter and the next, are not simple and cannot be fully evidenced and excavated by poll, survey or even interview; these methods too rehearse a reflexive, coherent subject. By employing the interview *and* textual encounter methods in tandem, I suggest that we are able to complicate our tidy conclusions about why people are watching, and to think through more

fully what watching *does* for the watchers. Choosing which parenting advice to use, and then negotiating with that advice – as in these encounters – is not simply evaluating ‘the best way’ to raise children, but rather involves a whole range of investments, judgements and evaluations that enabled these parents to do identity work. Contemporary parenting culture, as I argued in Chapter 5, is less the ‘science’ of perfect parenting and more the promotion of a certain kind of parent, a certain kind of parental subjectivity, a certain orientation towards one’s parenting. I have already explored the ways in which much contemporary parenting advice is geared towards facilitating these particular kinds of parental subjectivities. In the analysis of these encounters, I look now at how the ‘parenting self’ is produced through negotiative encounters with expertise.

Methods: interviews and text-in-action viewing

Having recruited local parents to participate in this part of the research, I used two methods in tandem. First, I interviewed the parents, either alone or in the peer groups that they had themselves assembled. These interviews were semi-structured around a set of questions, though I attempted too to facilitate the organic and tangential discussions that emerged from the responses. I asked participants how they would define themselves and offered example criteria such as age, social class, race or ethnicity, number of children and marital status. I asked if they felt they had a parenting philosophy that they followed, and what

kinds of advice, if any, they had sought either before giving birth or subsequently. I asked how they would define good and bad parenting. I asked if they watched any parenting television and their viewing habits, and finally I asked them directly about *Supernanny*. I then offered the participant(s) a choice of three episodes of *Supernanny*, and from the brief synopsis I offered of each², they chose the episode they wished to watch. The viewing session was recorded with a digital sound recorder, capturing both the audio track of the episode and the corresponding talk of participants.

Introducing the participants

The parents who took part were recruited locally through a range of avenues, including a childrens' art class, a lesbian mothers' community group and through personal introductions. Further details of these participants are included in Appendix 1. I have discussed some of the complexities of recruitment in Chapter 6, particularly in terms of recruiting fathers, and of recruiting working-class parents. These complexities may be bound up with the ways in which both the genre of 'talk' and the formats of reality television are gendered (Skeggs, Woods and Thumim, 2008; Gray, 1992) and in which the topic of 'parenting' itself euphemizes what is really 'mothering' (Lawler, 2000; Hay, 1997; Sunderland, 2006). For these reasons, perhaps, it proved very difficult to interest fathers in the research, although I made many attempts to; the only two that participated were the

² I used the episode synopsis offered through Channel 4's 'on demand' online watching facility, called 4oD. Each synopsis is just one sentence, naming the featured family and offering a brief detail of their principle problem. Available at www.4oD.org

spouses of women who had already agreed to participate. In terms of social class, I sought to include a broader range of participants than I eventually managed to secure. Some parents who at first agreed to participate, and with whom I had email correspondence or telephone conversations about the research, gradually slipped out of contact; they did not reply to requests for convenient days and times to hold sessions, stopped answering calls and emails and on one occasion I arrived for an interview only to find that the participating mother had simply gone out for the day. There are many possible reasons for these absenting strategies, but it is important to note the classed patterns of the participants who dropped out (mainly working-class). Where other academics and researchers working in the field of classed subjectivities have faced similar recruitment problems, they have suggested that research is read differently by working-class subjects, as unwanted surveillance, a situation exacerbated by the intensifying of governmental scrutiny in the lives of those defined as 'socially excluded' or 'marginalised' (Skeggs, Woods and Thumin, 2008).

The majority of the participants defined themselves as middle-class, although these classifications were sometimes shaky and hesitant. According to 'objective' systems for qualifying social class, it could be argued that these parents were securely middle-class; they are homeowners in a gentrified suburb of South London; they (or their spouses in the cases of stay-at-home parents) hold a range of professional employment positions, as furniture designers, teachers, advertising project managers, photographers; some spoke of their university education; others of the cleaners and gardeners they employ. These classificatory

systems though, once seen by sociologists as clear-cut, are riven with complexities (see Chapter 3), and these complexities were gestured to by some participants, who hesitantly drew on their occupations, their childhoods, background, 'roots' and their cultural values in order to define their social class. Class, as others too have found, is not always articulated *only* in terms of money and wealth, and the straightforward stapling of class to wealth can sometimes be problematic³. Susan's reference to her uncertain roots demonstrates this:

Susan: I don't think we can really...yeah, we *are* middle-class. But my roots are definitely...me and my husband, are working-class. Yeah. Well? Then, I was probably middle-class but no money. Or working-class, but...

Fiona: Rich! [all laugh]

Susan's comment points to the elasticity of the meaning of 'wealth', the complexity of mobility and the relationality of social class. Class cannot be easily isolated and placed within a stratification table, but rather it is given meaning through its position to other classes. If Susan's natal family were 'really' working-class, they were wealthy in relation to other working-class families she knew, but if they were 'really' middle-class they were

³ I am thinking of the partial social mobility of figures in the public eye, particularly celebrities, and the battle lines that are drawn over how to identify the newly rich. When the late reality television star Jade Goody announced in 2007 that she was planning to use her wealth, generated principally through celebrity magazine and tabloid newspaper interviews, to send her two sons to Oaklands, a private school in Essex, outrage was reported, centring on how this might impact upon the value and reputation of Oaklands. There are many other examples of these kinds of classed anxieties, in which (inappropriately?) acquired capital can be used to 'purchase' a fragile membership of the respectable classes.

impoverished. Her comment must also be read in terms of her biographical mobility; she articulates her present position to be middle-class, though this articulation is tinged with some compunctional regret ('I don't think we can really...yeah, we *are* middle-class'). The social class she identifies with now complicates her memories of the past; was she always middle-class, but just without money? Steph Lawler (2000) has examined the complexity of social mobility in interviews with women who had working-class childhoods but now identify as middle-class, and demonstrates how they attempt to 'solve' this dilemma by re-narrating themselves as having been always-already middle-class. Susan's tentative definition of herself does perhaps have resonances with these kinds of accounts.

Another participant, Helen, also evokes the complexity of her feelings about her social class. Her husband Phillip, one of the two fathers who participated, spoke most clearly out of all the participants of his middle-class privilege, emphasising the 'security' of his childhood which he felt protected him from 'the risks of life'. He stresses the anti-materialism of his family home, stating that there was 'never any extravagance' and that the family income was directed principally towards the childrens' private education. In Helen's account, immediately following Phillip's, she draws clear distinctions between his childhood security and the absence of security in hers. She toys with her definition, suggesting that her father's financial irresponsibility and her 'grotty' and transient childhood homes may position her as working-class, but she ultimately rejects this and negotiates a place for herself within a more complex biography:

Helen: My mother was educated, but not stable, and we never had any money. Oh *god*, I couldn't say I was working-class if both my parents were educated and I did a degree. But my mother *did* grow up in an orphanage, which I would say *is* quite working-class. And we lived in lots of grotty places, which *is* quite working-class. I didn't play with the kids outside the flats. But my dad was quite bourgeois, in terms of networks and things.

Helen wants to narrate herself as 'different' from the (working-class) people who lived in the same places as her (having educated parents, not playing outside with the other children, having bourgeois networks), but also to distinguish her middle-classness from that of her husband Phillip. Both Helen and Susan's accounts point to the disjunctures they feel between material wealth and classed feelings, between desires to claim a certain background and the suspicions that these claims cannot be made. I would suggest that these complexities indicate both evasive embarrassment around social class (Sayer, 2002) but also to the paucity of vocabulary around social class at this historical moment; a moment in which social class distinctions have become "increasingly codified, displaced and individualised" (Gillies, 2005: 835).

Informed as this thesis is by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, these narrations of working or middle class might better be seen as reflecting a classed 'becoming' rather than a classed 'being'. Bourdieu (1998) saw social class as neither a matter of essential attributes nor voluntary choices, but as divisions that must be constantly reproduced; 'classes exist in some sense as a state of virtuality, not as something given but as something to be done'

(1998: 12, cited in Lawler, 2004). It was perhaps mischievous to ask participants to 'give' me their social class in interview only to then excavate how they 'did' social class in the subsequent encounter; but this did demonstrate the significance with which participants were able to 'make' themselves as classed subjects was through drawing distinctions between themselves and the families they watched on *Supernanny* and between themselves and other viewers of the programme. These distinctions were transcribed into subtle codes of value, rarely explicitly naming social class; had I not asked participants to identify their social class (amongst their definitions of other vectors of difference) it may have gone unmentioned. But it was social class, and its intersections, spoken through other categories of worth and value, which saturated the encounters.

Enter researcher

I endeavoured to stay as silent as possible during these viewing sessions, to become part of the background, though this was not straightforward. Although we could be seduced by the everydayness of the research setting – in participants' homes, watching television, surrounded by peers – it is important to pay attention to how my very presence would have impacted upon what was speakable and unspeakable. My presence, and the artifice of the viewing situation (immediately following an interview, recorded by a discrete but very-much-present voice recorder) called forth a particular critical discourse, which I examine later in this chapter. Participants often sought my opinion and my reaction, either addressing me directly or asking questions about the episode. In smaller groups, or in

sessions where just one participant was taking part, it was impossible for me to *not* become part of the textual encounter. I would not claim that any of these sessions, however active or silent I felt able to be, were in any way 'natural'; in the very act of requesting that they be staged, and through my very presence, they were self-conscious and performative. I was an integral part of the encounter, sometimes being asked to corroborate my relationship with the programme, or my opinion of it, and sometimes to corroborate suspicions about the programme or the host, Jo Frost;

Do *you* use Supernanny? (Clara, during viewing)

Do *you* watch them? I know you do for this [research], but do you still watch, just for yourself? (Helen, during interview)

Who is this woman? What are her qualifications? (Louisa, during viewing)

Asking me to position myself in relation to the programme might have served as a kind of benchmark for participants; was it acceptable to watch this programme? Was it acceptable to *use* this programme? Was my interest in it purely academic or did I have a personal investment as a mother? What 'facts' could I confirm; in what ways is Frost qualified; what is her experience; how long is each family filmed? My responses to these questions and suspicions served as legitimations for subsequent opinions. I was imbued with a complex status, that I might hold the key to the programme. This status was certainly not

guaranteed though, with some participants wanting to contribute, or challenge, the research design itself, making suggestions or asking questions about what their role was as a participant, what I hoped to do with these sessions.

So...are you trying to find out if there's sufficient advice available for parents, is *that* what this is about? (Elizabeth, during viewing)

Is that all you need from us? (Clara, during viewing)

So much of it is about the bloody naughty bench. I mean, I don't know, have you *counted* how many times the word naughty bench is used? (Amy, during viewing)

What do you want us to do? Just watch it? (Susan, during viewing)

These comments reveal the anxieties that being a research participant can engender, but some, particularly those delivered in a dismissive or disbelieving tone, created a good deal of anxiety on my part too. Did I really just want participants to watch *Supernanny*? Was this a sound method? *Should* I count how many times the naughty step was referenced by the narrator in the programme? In their study of the making of class in reality television, Beverly Skeggs, Helen Wood and Nancy Thumin (2008) suggest that using the text-in-action method enables the researcher to retreat *somewhat* from the research encounter, as the television programme becomes the focus of attention. They also comment on the disbelief with which their requests were met by some participants; that they 'just' wanted

participants to watch television, and that they were willing to pay them to do it⁴. The above quotes here demonstrate the suspicions around the research design, and Amy suggests another quantitative methodological avenue, counting the mentions of 'naughty step', implying that this would, for her, result in more convincing critical data that 'just' watching could⁵. Illustrating the actively critical discourse that this research setting seemed to invite, Amy herself stated her interest in the subsequent analysis of the data that the sessions would yield, even offering to proofread my thesis! Some months after our viewing session, she contacted me to ask if anything had been published from it that she could read.

In other studies of television encounters, researchers have reported varying, but complicated, degrees of possible retreat from the televisual encounter (Hobson, 1982; Walkerdine, 1986; Gray, 1992). Research methods, particularly ethnographic or those with ethnographic intentions, have historically been used to produce 'scientific' accounts of gender and class, with the middle-class researcher at the centre remaining an untouched pillar of objectivity (Skeggs, 1997; Thornham, 2001). As I discussed in Chapter 3, I wished to trouble this notion of scientific objectivity, through interrogating my presence as a researcher, as a stranger and as another parent, rather than erasing it, particularly in terms of the shame and pleasure of the programme (which I discuss in Chapter 8). Taking account of emotions in a research encounter means, as much as anything, accounting for my own

⁴ Although I was not able to pay my participants, I did take a bottle of wine to each session for the host. Although this offering was always graciously received, I always felt a (classed?) anxiety about whether it was a 'nice' bottle or whether it was appropriate.

⁵ For a discussion of the relative value ascribed to, and the methodological relationship between, 'quoting' and 'counting' as 'ways of knowing' see Letherby (2004)

emotions, fantasies and projections (Walkerdine, 1986). I was as much a part of these encounters as any of the participants; often loudly, nervously and uncomfortably so. As I asked questions of these parents, I felt enormously obtrusive, that my questions were clumsy and blunt and that I had little right to even question the terms of their parenting and by extension their lives. When participants made suggestions or asked questions, of the terms of the research or even the method itself, I felt defensive and evasive. These encounters were saturated too with my own history, by the cultural capitals I was able to play, by the knowledge I have of the programme, by the amount and kind of mastery I was able to exercise, by how well I was able to inhabit the habitus of the researcher.

Valerie Walkerdine (1986) has written evocatively of her fantasy to be read as the working-class girl she once was rather than the middle-class researcher she now is. I was unnerved by similar fantasies and confusions, both my own and attributed through classed misreading of me by participants; what Diane Reay (1997) has called the 'double-bind' of being a working-class feminist academic. These classed dynamics, which I explore in more detail in the next chapter, were complexified by the fault-line of mother/researcher within me. In one session, I had brought my daughter with me; while she played with the daughters of the participants in the neighbouring house, a texture of parental camaraderie settled us into the session. After the interview and viewing session, we shared a meal and the accompanying light-hearted banter, about how we all clearly needed the naughty step too, went some way to neutralize the shame we might have felt when the children began squabbling. Without romanticizing, it is important to gesture to the fact that I was a researcher *and* a mother for

this session, and to acknowledge the difference this made for participants. In another session, the only other that had children 'present' in some way, I was the woman in the room without her child, and this too made a difference to the texture of the session. The parents involved had brought their children, thinking, as I had too when one emailed me with the suggestion, that they would play together while we talked in peace. Of course they did not, and demanded as much of their parents as might be expected of three toddlers. That these demands happened *while* a researcher asked questions *about* their parenting and requested they watch a television programme designed to provoke anxiety around parenting, may have contributed to the intensity with which they must have felt compelled to respond to their children. During what was ostensibly our 'viewing' session, one of the mothers 'viewed' very little of the programme. Instead, she busied herself with fetching snacks, playing games and ferrying children back to the living room (where we had installed them in front of a childrens' television programme). Halfway through viewing the *Supernanny* episode, I had the overwhelming desire to apologise, pack away my things and leave.

Just as my presence would have undoubtedly impacted upon the self-consciousness of their intensive parenting, so too did their intensive parenting prompt feelings of guilt in me as a researcher. The very intensity with which they displayed their attentive and sensitive parenting reminded me (with dismay) the times I have rushed my daughter to bed in order to read a journal article, or packed her off to stay with family in order to attend a conference. Indeed, in order to attend this particular viewing session, I had to make

arrangements for my daughter to be picked up from school. The emotions of researcher and of mother coalesced in difficult ways, reminding me of what Ruth Behar (1993) has termed the 'borderland identity' with its 'fault-lines quaking within me'. Parenting, and particularly, as I have argued throughout this thesis, *mothering*, is a set of highly relational practices, involving always comparisons, judgements and self-accounting in reference to others. As an outsider in these sessions, I may have been a source of anxiety, a potential scrutiniser, but I also felt scrutinised as a possible source of evaluative knowledge about advice itself, and self-scrutinised as I drew my own (sometimes guilty) comparisons between myself and participants.

In another session, I felt rage when a mother stated with pride that her children will try anything at mealtimes; the examples that she offered of the outlandish food they eat and love were scallops and lobsters. I was furious; *I've* never even had lobster! The notion of offering food to children as expensive and exclusive as this struck me as ridiculous and wasteful, and I felt angry that their eating of it was offered up as a source of parental pride, as confirmation of correct parenting. This and other moments were reminders of the sometimes shaky classed locations that both I and the participants inhabited.

Whilst transcribing the interviews and viewing sessions, I have been reminded of the enormous generosity when someone agrees to participate in your research, and of consequent betrayal of writing; isolating phrases and answers and framing them within a lattice of argument of my own choosing. The very technology of writing – that requires a

'pinning down' of what happened, what was said and to find a conclusion – is a necessary step in the research process in which data starts to acquire fixity, stops drifting, ceases to complexify. But whilst this step is necessary, it is also an imposition, like 'taking a bowl of water to study the river'⁶. Can I ever do justice to the encounters with these clumsy unpickings? Some of the recordings of these sessions made me laugh when I heard them again; some literally fizz with the pleasure and camaraderie when participants talk, gossip and make jokes about the everyday, unremarkable and perhaps banal worlds in which they live and move. It is hard to capture that fizz. That said, I want to avoid romanticising this talk; it was haunted constantly by what Imogen Tyler has termed 'maternal figurations' (Tyler, forthcoming), the others of subjectivity against which the parental self is defined. I felt the stickiness of these constitutive others myself, as a disruptive stranger, as someone who does not quite feel herself to fit in the worlds evoked by participants. In the discussions of these moments that follow, I endeavour then to pay attention to my own looming presence and to my emotional encounter in these sessions.

Viewer loyalties

During recruiting, I explained that in order to take part there was no need to have seen the programme before, to have any strong opinions about it, or to consider oneself a regular viewer of it. Of the participants, only two claimed to have never seen the programme

⁶ Meg Barker suggested this phrase in a discussion about the architectures of research at the 'Secrecy and Silence' symposium held at LSE in September 2009.

before (Vanina and Fiona). For the remaining participants, who had all seen the programme, there was a particular evasiveness about identifying as loyal viewers. There was a good deal of conscious accounting for one's watching of the programme during interviews:

We only watch it when it's on [...] it's a real fascination for me. After a long day, and we're having teas-on-knees sort of thing. We've never done that purposively, just sort of stumbled across it (Helen)

I don't make a point of watching it. Just if it's on and I happen to catch it (Louisa)

I haven't watched it *religiously*. I've seen, heard of quite a few [parenting programmes], but that [Supernanny] is the only one I know - I don't actually know any of the others. But just when its on and I catch it. (Clara)

This accounting was repeated across many other sessions; there were reasons that it seemed acceptable to offer as to why the programme had been watched, particularly 'just catching it'. This disclaimer of 'catching it', or 'stumbling across it', was an important theme, as a way of suggesting that one's relationship to television is not deliberative or religious – one is not *fanatic* about viewing – but rather is a distraction, an entertaining reward for a long day. In these accounts, *Supernanny* has not commanded any loyalty from these parents. These accounts also indicate the indeterminacy of viewing; you might as easily 'catch' a

programme as miss it, because the television is not always switched on, and viewing habits are purposive or reflexive (for quality programming), or casual and careless – and *Supernanny* fell into the latter category for most participants. Elizabeth, for example, produced a much more conscious account of the parenting programmes she *chooses* to watch, usually after they have first been broadcast, using online facilities such as the iPlayer⁷. Talking about *Supernanny* viewing habits were extensions of talking about one's broader television and cultural habits, and in making these accounts participants constructed and refined a version of themselves as consuming subjects who freely choose and negotiate exactly which media they will select and attend to, and which they will carelessly watch if they catch it. What they certainly would not do is become fanatical about or 'make a point' of watching something they care little about, or that has little value. This was a way of perhaps retreating from the programme's disturbing or upsetting content, but it was also a strategic way of holding the format at a distance and of dismissing its significance for one's own life. These dismissals generated certain kinds of value in terms of one's parenting:

I don't watch much television. I do have two *Supernanny* books at home, but I only read one, I didn't have time to read the other one. If you're doing other things with your child, you don't watch much. And there aren't many parenting shows on in the evening
(Patrizia)

⁷ A BBC online facility offering a range of already-broadcast programmes for streaming to a computer.

Here, Patrizia is replicating a common hierarchy of value between different cultural forms, in this case, parenting books and parenting television. Whilst the former has a good deal of cultural worth, implying knowledge, the 'science' of parenting, literacy and so on, the latter has little – contained within the assessment that middle class parents read parenting books and working class parents watch parenting television (see Chapter 3). For Patrizia, parenting television viewing is dismissed⁸, but so too are the accompanying books, since both act as a distraction and a time-vacuum from the real activity of value; childrearing itself.

As the earlier quote from Helen implies, the 'take-it-or-leave-it' casualness with which she narrates her viewing loyalty (or lack thereof) does not mean that she is not interested in the programme – as she says, she is *fascinated* by it – but as she subsequently elaborates, she feels her fascination is more in terms of how parents can get to such a situation rather than with the advice that underpins the programme. For Helen, the families on the screen 'really are extreme cases, these are real fundamentals' and watching it serves as a comfort that she 'imagine[s] I would never allow it to get to that'. Helen is fascinated by the parenting 'battles' that other people choose to fight, and watching *Supernanny* is one way in which she pursues her interest. The 'extremism' of the featured families was a theme that emerged across the interview and viewing sessions. Elizabeth commented during viewing

⁸ Patrizia's remarks here were also interesting as a misreading of the definition of 'parenting television'. She stated that there are very few parenting programmes on in the evening, which we might counter empirically (Skeggs, Woods and Thumin, 2008) but she also mentioned as an example *In the Night Garden* (BBC) which is certainly a childrens', and not a 'parenting', programme.

that 'its always families that are in dire straights, isn't it' and was met with a chorus of agreement.

Through these complex accounts of what *Supernanny* means to them, the lack of viewer loyalty that they feel towards the programme and the narration of oneself as a critical consumer and negotiating viewer, these parents used a variety of strategies to dismiss the significance of the programme for their own lives.

In order to create cultural value from these dismissals, there were comparative evaluations of what the programme means more broadly for other parents, parents who were not imagined to be as critical or thoughtful. The popularity of the programme was interpreted apocalyptically, as heralding the ways in which 'people' (that is, 'other people') are taken in by voyeuristic and damaging reality television:

And then you think, there are some people who actually have to *learn* this. I mean, who *are* these people? (Louisa)

People would rather watch car crash television (Amy)

The only reason people watch it is for the drama really...parents who haven't got a clue really (Phillip)

It is not clear whether Phillip and Louisa are referring to programme viewers or programme participants when they speak of parents who 'haven't got a clue' and 'actually have to learn this'; Phillip's statement suggests that he is speaking of viewers, though he could certainly be referring to both. A few minutes into the viewing session, Supernanny enters striding along the street and Phillip calls out triumphantly 'ah here comes the theatre!' His marking of this moment as theatre sets him apart from the parents who 'haven't got a clue'. It is a key moment in his production of himself as a critical viewer.

Amy was one of the most consistently critical of the participants. When she first agreed to take part in the research, she offered a passionate explanation for her dislike of the programme, linking it with gardening makeover programmes, the extension of opinions about parenting and even false memory syndrome (suggesting that her older relatives were 'misremembering' using the naughty step). In the first dramatic montage of bad behaviour during the viewing session, she excitedly confirmed her misgivings, not just in terms of the programme but in terms of the consequences of the programme;

Amy: See! There! That's *exactly* what I mean! They've clearly just selected the edited highlights...the way telly works...set him up as an absolute monster. But there are people who will walk along the street, see a child having a tantrum, and think, oh *well*, he's *obviously* an absolute monster. That *child*...is a real person, that's been set up as an absolute monster[...] They've done everything they can, in the same way

as documentaries do [...] this is a kind of extreme version, whether that's done through nice editing or if its real, an extreme version of toddler behaviour. So red-top. You know, tabloid.

Amy explicitly draws on an 'effects' model of media consumption and links here between the visual logic of the programme, which repeats footage of the same tantrum two and sometimes three times across the course of a single episode, with the ways in which tantrums are read and interpreted in the wider world. The *Supernanny* viewer, Amy insists, leaves the programme changed; ready to judge other stranger-children as monsters. The visual logics of the programme are situated firmly here at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy; so red-top, so tabloid, so trashy.

The cultural economy of advice

Both in interview and during viewing, a cultural hierarchy of parenting advice was constructed within which *Supernanny* was ambivalently cast. Comparisons with other programmes and other experts were productive spaces through which parents staked their support and conferred legitimacy. Making these evaluative comparisons are part of the work of the rhetoric of 'intensive parenting' examined by Sharon Hays (1997) in which parents must sift through, weigh up and assess which advice and parenting orthodoxy they will follow.

Themes of the popular critique of the programme, in newspaper comment pieces, in interviews with parenting experts and online, were reproduced and transformed in these sessions, and parents' opinions of the programme were mediated through these extra-textual texts. An examination of where the programme's disseminations and appraisals were echoed can reveal much of the antagonisms that historical accounts of advice all too often neglect. It can also illustrate the complicated reflexive work that parents engage in when assessing and evaluating childrearing expertise that is quite above and beyond the effectiveness of the childrearing practices themselves.

I have already explored some of the complicated debates that have been staged between different childrearing experts (see Chapter 1). These debates were invoked as a comparative basis for appraising the techniques proposed by *Supernanny*. Several participants referred to the parenting expert and writer Gina Ford, whose *Contented Baby Book* they had read; and which several said they had rejected. Others referred to the programmes made by developmental psychologist Professor Robert Winston:

We've watched some of the Professor Winston one. Er, was it *Child Of Our Time*? He's less sort of...prescriptive. And dictatorial (Phillip)

There's some reality television that I love. Like Jamie's dinner thing. I just feel that there's some integrity about them. I'm sure *Child of Our Time* doesn't have such a big

audience. They're not being made just for entertainment. Its done with so much more integrity, it just has a much more positive view of children and their parents (Amy)

I would argue that these comments are not just about viewer preferences; they also represent opportunities for social distinction around what kinds of programmes you watch, what kinds you enjoy and what those choices say about the kind of person, and parent, you are. Although many participants produced an ambivalent or hesitant account of whether and how often they watched *Supernanny*, often littered with provisos, they found it easier to profess their love and loyalty of other parenting programmes, which were described in comparatively glowing terms. Not all reality television or parenting television was deemed problematic. Amy's example of the programmes made by UK celebrity chef Jamie Oliver as having 'more integrity' than *Supernanny* is something we might take issue with, not least because of Oliver's fiery on-screen confrontations and off-screen outbursts⁹. Oliver's presentational style aside, the campaigning purpose of his programmes as a front for his nutrition missions resonates with Amy's sense of integrity. Amy's comments about the smaller audience commanded by Winston's programme, as opposed to the popularity of *Supernanny*, reproduces hierarchies between mass entertainment and more highbrow programmes, that are 'not just made for entertainment'. Susan too spoke of other parenting programmes 'resonating' with her:

⁹ In *Jamie's School Dinners* (Channel 4, 2006), Oliver infamously branded parents who gave children crisps and carbonated drinks "tossers...complete arseholes", whilst in his more recent programme *Jamie's Ministry of Food* (Channel 4, 2008) he upset spokespeople for the town of Rotherham for misrepresenting them as incompetent cooks.

I related quite a lot to Tanya Byron, and *Little Angels* and all that. I just thought, whatever she was saying, just sort of resonated with me, I thought, yes that sounds right, and I took that on board [...] anything with Tanya Byron (Susan)

I want here to expand here on Susan's comments and relate them to a specific polarity produced by cultural commentators between *Supernanny* and the more 'highbrow' parenting programmes made by Dr Tanya Byron, including *House of Tiny Tearaways* (BBC, 2005-2007) and, as Susan mentions, *Little Angels* (BBC, 2004). Susan referred to Byron several times during the session, drawing comparisons with the *Supernanny* Jo Frost in terms of their qualifications, experience and right to the claim of an expert. It is this dyad of expertise that had clearest resonance in the research sessions; although not all participants named Byron and her programme, the terms in which they criticized Frost and her programme echoed those that have been produced extra-textually in reference to an opposition between the two. Byron herself withdrew from parenting television in 2007, making several oblique comments about how it had become too 'well-marketed', begun to 'go too far' and referring to other parenting 'experts' in suspicious quotemarks¹⁰. The content of the parenting orthodoxies offered by Frost and Byron's programmes share broad similarities, yet they have been constructed in opposition, particularly in interviews with the journalist Decca Aitkenhead for *The Guardian* in, respectively, 2006 and 2007.

¹⁰ See her online interviews at raisingkids.co.uk and mumsnet.com (both 2007). Criticizing *Supernanny* (but without stooping so low as to directly name it) is a craft exercised by several of the clinicians who front similar advice programmes. Byron's co-clinician on *Little Angels* Stephen Briers promised in his book *Superpowers for Parents* (2008) that "you won't find any naughty steps here".

Aitkenhead's interview with Frost illustrates the disguised ways in which classed contempt continues to pervade culture. Hostile and vilifying, Aitkenhead constructs an account of the history of childrearing advice that is curiously static and free from conflict (see Chapter 1 for some of the historical accounts which would disagree with this), and positions *Supernanny* as an irresponsible and sensationalist departure from established harmony. The 'science' of scientific motherhood is presented as a guarantee of its accuracy, and Aitkenhead constructs the field of childrearing theory as a set of congruent approaches that have developed through an uncomplicated trajectory of progress and agreement. It is Frost's unfamiliarity with this 'science' that marks her as worthy of dismissal; Aitkenhead says 'she has never read – or even heard of – any of the leading theorists I mention' and describes her as an 'unqualified nanny' who had 'never trained formally', setting up something of a familiar notion that experience is worth less than instruction, in the realm of parenting.

The distance set up between Frost and more qualified, scientific, educated sources is lengthened through Aitkenhead's portrait of a woman who, as well as being unfamiliar with the science of parenting, is also not as articulate as the journalist herself. She painstakingly documents every instance of Frost's verbal tics and mispronunciations;

But I am," she says indignantly. "I am. It goes without saying. I don't just want to know on the surface why. I need to know and find out exactly where the root of that lies. So in

retrospective [sic] of that I do that mandatorially [sic] within the families" [...] "Nothing is ever set up or derived [sic]". I think she means contrived.

The contempt with which Aitkenhead portrays Frost is thrown into sharp relief when compared with the interview she conducted the following year with Dr Tanya Byron. In many ways, Byron and Frost have had similar career trajectories. Both hosted parenting television, became celebrity experts, write newspaper columns and have published a number of parenting advice books. Whilst the respective programmes are styled, packaged and promoted differently, received and reviewed differently in the media, both use therapeutic and confessional narratives to organize episodes, centre on almost identical behavioural strategies (although the basis upon which the expertise is validated is different) and are similarly paced in terms of editing. The same issues of voyeurism, children's consent and vulnerability and the problematic transforming of 'dysfunction' into 'entertainment' might be equally leveled at Frost and Byron's programmes, yet in Aitkenhead's interviews, and in wider disseminations, the similarities between the programmes become symbolically annihilated.

Whilst Frost's expertise and experience as a nanny for fifteen years is derided by Aitkenhead as 'unqualified' and at odds with childrearing advice, Byron's expertise and experience as a clinician is constructed as 'calmly authoritative', 'compelling', 'thoughtful', with 'professional integrity', 'brilliant in her field, but with the polymath's gift for making complicated ideas accessible'. Tellingly, Aitkenhead introduces Byron as 'the respectable

face of parenting television' and proceeds to sketch a portrait of her that is intertwined with ideas of female professional success and domestic respectability.

At 38, her CV is a paean to alpha-female achievement, with a doctorate in clinical psychology and her first child at 27. She has been with her actor husband Bruce, DC Terry Perkins in *The Bill*, since she was 21, and they live with their two kids in a rambling north London house, which she shows me round with an unaffected charm.

Frost meanwhile, is 'still single and lives with her widowed father. If she's right when she says *Supernanny* hasn't made her rich, she has not been very smart at all about managing her new career.' The narrative of a caring and supportive daughter who continues to live with her father is not even presented as an option; rather, Frost's failure to acquire a husband, children or a house of her own is uncompromisingly presented as 'not being very smart'. As Aitkenhead remarks, 'on the whole, her dimness seems authentic'. These two interviews draw on discourses of good and bad science, scientific and natural mothering, entertainment and 'real' expertise. As such, they demonstrate the wider politics of interpretation and reflective work that parents did when watching, negotiating and processing advice in our viewing sessions. Susan makes an implied connection between Frost and Byron, stating that her 'problem' with *Supernanny* is 'right, what are her qualifications?' Jane replies, referring to her experience, but Susan counters this with 'yeah, but she's not a child psychologist'. The criticisms that are levelled at *Supernanny* in these *Guardian* interviews resonate with the criticisms made by the research participants,

and can be similarly grouped into three principle concerns; how it is 'unreal', how it is 'unscientific' and how it is 'reductive'.

The critical viewer; suspicions and savviness

Only occasionally did other accounts of the relationship with *Supernanny* emerge in these sessions, but these alternate accounts too were opportunities to re-create oneself as exercising a kind of mastery over the programme:

I have to confess I'm one of those people that just loves that real-life stuff! Not that I'm going to learn anything. (Kelly)

Kelly, who does admit readily to watching *Supernanny*, posits her pleasure of 'that real-life stuff' as a kind of guilty pleasure – she *knows* she's not going to learn anything, but she does feel she can *confess* to watching it. She is able to hold the trashy unworthiness of reality television at a distance, *because* she knows it is trashy. Louisa, who confessed a similar kind of pleasure, made a similar series of distancing moves from the programme, stating that she had cried when watching the programme, 'at an epiphanic moment, because I'm able to suspend that I'm being wrapped around a television producer's finger.' In this way, because she can demonstrate her critical appreciation of the machinations of reality television, she is able to suspend her usual mastery of the programme and *allow herself* to

succumb to tears. Demonstrating this kind of critical mastery meant that these participants were able to claim that they were not being duped by reality television or wallowing in trash television, but rather (importantly) that they were *allowing* themselves to wallow, to suspend their criticism, for the pleasures of watching. This echoes the findings from other television research (Gray, 1992), particularly around reality television (Skeggs, Woods and Thumim, 2008), in which viewing must be authorised and legitimated by middle-class subjects through reflexive performance and critical evaluation. In this way, these participants could produce some cultural value from their watching. These evaluative strategies surfaced during viewing too, where participants were able to display their critical capitals, their knowingness around the machinations of reality television.

Samuel: But the camera crew...they're giving them sugar? [laughter]

[during viewing]

Amy: the sun shines at the end, always, have you noticed?

[during viewing]

In these examples, Samuel jokes about the possible techniques used to elicit the appropriately dramatic behaviour from children; in doing so, he both demonstrates his awareness of the processes of filming and his caution around taking the screen as evidence of the 'real'. Amy draws attention to the narrative conventions of the obligatory happy ending. Each is performing their own capacities as a 'savvy viewer/voyeur', a necessary

critical distance that is part of the game of participating in reality television without succumbing to its illusions (Andrejevic, 2004). Both Samuel and Amy have worked in television professionally (as a camera technician and researcher, respectively), and so I was not surprised by their evaluative display. However, most of the other participants also performed their critical capitals in similar ways, demonstrating that they too could 'see the strings' of artifice in reality television. Fiona had never seen the *Supernanny* before, but she was familiar through other programmes with the use of a camera close-up at dramatic points to produce an emotional climax – 'the money shot' of reality television (Grindstaff, 2002). This familiarity enabled her to joke about the on-screen tears she was expecting at one point in the programme:

Fiona: See I think maybe I lack empathy. I'm just like, come on, give us the tears, give us the tears, its not a programme without the tears.

Furthermore, I would also suggest that the guilty evasiveness surrounding the professed frequency and fanaticism of watching is tied in complex ways to the shameful emotions evoked through watching other parents on the screen fail. For despite the ways in which, in interview, the programmes were spoken of casually, dismissively, as daft diversions that were rarely watched, the text-in-action viewing sessions revealed a much more emotional and intensive encounter. Attempting to hold the programme at a critical distance, and speaking of it as a guilty pleasure, may then also be about attempting to hold the shameful

emotions it generates at a distance from oneself. I explore this in more detail in the next chapter.

Refusing *Supernanny*

Evaluating the programme and drawing distance between it and oneself through discourses of critical reflexivity, not being 'taken in' and viewer savviness were important ways in which these viewers attempted to create barriers between themselves and the emotional content of the screen action. There were several moments in the sessions where the assessments of the value of the *Supernanny* programme suggested an embryonic kernel of criticism leveled at parenting culture more widely. The specific visual logic of the programme was deemed problematic in ways that I explored in Chapter 5; in that it scrutinized the everyday moments of childrearing and ballooned them through visual repetition and editing into highly significant intimacy issues. The act of refusing *Supernanny* — refusing to be 'taken in' by it, drawing attention to its artifice — was linked implicitly and at points explicitly to dissatisfactions with the consequences that it was felt to have effected upon the everyday experiences of parenting. *Supernanny* was held as a demonstrable cause of others assuming the worst of parents, including these participants;

I wouldn't watch it again because I feel that I'm being a bit manipulated. Its designed to make me feel bad about other people. Rather than, they are thoughtful and kind, and they're doing their best. Its just about, they're failing. (Amy)

I suppose throughout the years people have always looked on and disapproved or whatever, but you knew you were just going to be left to get on with it, but *now* its like, ooh you should be doing this and you're doing that, and complete strangers have got an opinion
(Jane)

I argued in Chapter 4 that *Supernanny* cannot be analysed in isolation of the parenting culture which precedes it and from which it has emerged. In the interview and viewing sessions, however, the programme was invoked as a significant precursor for the tenets of contemporary parenting culture; it was narrated as *causing* the intense scrutiny with which parents are judged on their children's behaviour;

Someone was saying to me recently, they were talking about this especially with relation to television...that we are getting obsessed, and that *Supernanny* is fuelling this obsession...that, as parents, we're absolutely obsessed with kids being well-behaved, and good, and behaving in a social situation as, you know, we'd like them to. As opposed to letting them be kids, and talking to them and being creative with them. Its all about curtailng them, and stopping them. Its all about discipline and nothing about being creative with them and exploring...who they are (Louisa)

The balance between 'letting them be kids' (being relaxed, encouraging their creativity, letting them express themselves) and 'being a parent' (exercising parental authority) is itself a highly contested and elusive equilibrium, and one which several parents pointed to as a

site of impossible struggle. This equilibrium is also marked by class, with the authoritarian parent, issuing demands and expecting compliance, visualized as working-class, whilst the permissive parent, encouraging expression without sanctions, is (usually) visualized as middle-class. Of course, even discourses of permissiveness can slip into those of leniency or even 'neglect', and the struggle to 'strike a balance' is a struggle to avoid an excess of either parenting sin. This has recently coalesced around notions of the 'authoritative' parent; this parenting 'type' too has been visualized as firmly middle-class (Demos, 2009)¹¹. Rather than offering final answers regarding this balance, watching *Supernanny* simply heightened this sense of impossibility and troubled reflection for some participants, despite the reservations expressed about the ethics or artifice of the programme and in spite of the critical distance with which these participants endeavoured to produce in relation to it. Intensive mothering itself was not always celebrated as trouble-free and guaranteeing results. As Hays (1997) found, as an ideology it is labour-intensive, time-demanding and emotionally exhausting. Negotiating, explaining and creating a sense of agency for children – although heralded across advice as conducive to childrens' self-esteem, psychological health – was experienced with ambivalence; although intensive mothering appeared to promise harmony (which did not always materialize), it also 'manacled mothers to sensitivity' (Walkerline and Lucey, 1989). The exhaustion created by, and sometimes refusal of, this kind of mothering and the advice industry that offers guidelines for its achievement, is hinted to in the following statements:

¹¹ Keen to avoid accusations of classism, *Demos* insisted in its report that none of the three parenting styles they observed (authoritarian, permissive and authoritative) were associated with particular social classes; yet at the same time they claimed that the authoritative style was mostly demonstrated by middle-class parents.

Kelly: I *do* find that maybe I *do* discipline him [son] differently, you know, outside the house.

Jane: Yeah! You're self-conscious!

Kelly: You feel self-conscious and you also just want him to get over it.

Jane: You don't want to have to explain, just *please* do it!

I find advice quite nauseating. I got a book from [mutual friend] no less! I nearly bloody threw it back at her. I said, its all very well reading the book but [son]'s not read it. So the book tells me what to do and then he doesn't perform to type! I mean! (Helen)

It was interesting that the reservations felt about these tenets of intensive sensitivity appeared to translate into specific and particular reservations about *Supernanny* – a programme which (compared to other examples of parenting television) appears at times to offer a critique of intensive parenting and insist upon discipline and authority, rather than negotiation. Whilst there were certainly moments when some of the participants revelled in the newly-discovered authority of the parents on the screen, or related with humour their own parental 'failings' (and joked about their possible need for the Supernanny), overall the refusals of *Supernanny* did not translate into refusals of parenting culture.

Refusing, critiquing and assessing *Supernanny* rather, was one incoherent and contradictory part of producing oneself as a particular kind of mother (too informed to take Supernanny

seriously) and a particular kind of viewer (one who is critically attuned to the artifice of reality television).

The account of oneself as a savvy, reflexive viewer who could remain untouched by the material of the programme was however an unstable one. The affectivity of the material on the screen and the emotionality it provoked in the room could not be contained within this fantasy of critical mastery. When Louisa whispered to me, 'I think I'm going to cry' (as a mother reads out an 'I love you mummy' note from her daughter), this moment might be interpreted as both an ironic comment on the cloying sentimentality of the scene *and* an attempt to master the desire to cry by drawing attention to it. I had tears in my eyes when Louisa said this. Silences in the room at particularly emotional points in the televisual narrative might indicate an embarrassment at the on-screen melodrama *and* an excess of affectivity that could not be verbalized. The following exchange demonstrates I think the paradox of wanting to be or wanting to perform as a critical viewer (compounded no doubt by my presence) and the emotions – both pleasurable and shameful – involved and invoked by the viewing encounter. Whilst watching a highly charged (and emotionally violent) scene between mother Heather and her son Brandon, a conversation begins around the guilt of their (unbearable) enjoyment of the programme:

Jane: This is horrible.

Fiona: It is horrible.

Jane: It's going to cause him so many...

Fiona: So why is it funny? We're using his misery as entertainment.

Susan: Well, no, the idea is to educate people through this.

[all talk]

Fiona: Yeah but its not though is it? To educate...it would be a different programme if it was.

Several: Yeah, yeah.

Fiona: They choose the most extreme examples

Jane: Well, they could do this without it being broadcast couldn't they? Get someone to help them.

Susan: Shhh! Listen! [laughter]

This viewing session was animated from the beginning, and the participants demonstrated a good deal of pleasure, whooping with delight at the childrens' subterfuge, imitating Frost's accent and making bawdy jokes about the 'hunky' husband. This group also repeatedly echoed one another's phrases, a demonstration of both the intimate group dynamic and the particular relationality of this viewing encounter. They affectively mirror one another throughout. Faced with the uncompromising footage of the distressing scene in question, the texture of the encounter changed and after a long pause, they briefly adopt a self-conscious stance in this exchange. Despite all the critical mastery that the participants attempted to demonstrate in their appraisals of the programme, these appraisals were frequently punctured by their succumbing to voyeuristic pleasures (and other kinds of

pleasures). A key strategy was to reflect upon these pleasures themselves; to simply wallow in the sensate of reality television was not an option.

In this chapter, I have sought to illustrate the significance, and also the illusion, of being a 'rational viewer', and a critical one. This is threaded through the injunction within parenting culture to 'choose' a parenting approach autonomously, as a path to becoming empowered and emboldened by advice, but not cowed by it; of choosing to 'buy-the-book' rather than going 'by-the-book'. I discussed this injunction in Chapters 1 and 5. In the next chapter, I excavate the affective and emotional aspects of these encounters with *Supernanny* more fully, paying attention to what did not fit into the fantasy of the critical viewer and what could not be contained within the critical discourse that the research setting appeared to invite. This programme – and I argue, parenting advice and culture more widely – takes hold of us as parental subjects in ways we are not entirely conscious of and in ways we cannot entirely master, invoking fears, desires and disavowals.

Chapter 8 – Precarious Pleasures and Shame

As I write this chapter, my computer makes a ping sound, alerting me to a new email, sent by my mum and titled ‘motherhood – FUNNY!’. Distracted, I open it. It is a ‘funny’ chainmail, a sequence of images vacuumed up from online archives and written together with a narrative text. It begins, ‘motherhood...in the animal kingdom. On the river bank (*photograph of an otter cradling its tiny cub*)...in Africa (*two elephants, one big one small, their trunks curled together*)...in India (*a tiger cub resting its head and paw upon the paw of an adult tiger paw*)...in the Ocean (*a dolphin swimming alongside a larger one*)...in Africa (*a baby gorilla sucking the thumb of a larger gorilla*)...in the Arctic (*a tiny polar bear nestled into the neck of its sleeping parent*)...and FINALLY SOMEWHERE NEAR ASDA” and its accompanying visual punchline (See Figure 7).



Figure 7: Somewhere near Asda...

This image is not new to me, nor are the stereotypes underlying it; I am familiar enough with the conventions of chainmail to have been expecting a visual punchline that relies upon classed cruelty, social class being the newly acceptable site for prejudicial stereotypes. This image rehearses ideas about mothers from the lower classes; working-class or perhaps more accurately the 'underclass'. The 'somewhere near Asda' caption places her in a classed if not geographical location, with Asda, a cheap supermarket, serving as a class signifier. There are other signifiers too; this woman is white, overweight, wearing baggy clothing, tattooed. Several features of the white working-class mother coalesce in one image. Would this 'joke' *work* if the woman had a toned athletic body, if she were clad in well-fitting, aspirational or glamorous clothes, if she had an expensive haircut? I suspect not. In this visual sequence, the distinctions between human and animal mothers have been blurred, even exchanged; animal mothers from across the world are pictured in nurturing positions with their offspring, protecting, supporting and resting with their young. This (barely human?) mother picks hers up by its ankle, with a deftness we might otherwise associate with the animals in the preceding photographs. Other online contexts I have seen this specific image reproduced in include jokes about the 'new underclass' and mock ethnographies of 'chav' parenting. The kind of parents who shop in Asda cannot be trusted to protect their children or treat them with tenderness. They are subhuman; even animals display more affection and gentleness, as the cloyingly sentimental images in this chainmail suggest.

I want to go beyond this reading of classed cruelty however, and to examine in more depth the fragility and ambivalence with which this kind of post-PC nihilistic, and often misanthropic, humour is reproduced and circulated around notions of parenting. This chainmail came from my mum, a working-class woman, who found it funny enough to send to me along with several of her friends. It had been circulated among several dozen recipients before it landed in my inbox and will no doubt make its way to many other recipients. Senders and recipients from across the social class spectrum participated in this joke. The willingness to participate may speak equally of either the power of the discourse of 'classlessness' (so that it is not perceived as a classed cruelty), or the hilarity of the 'new cruelty' (and the injunction to be robust enough to 'take a joke'), or both, or something more. I want to explore the productive function of this kind of humour around parenting, and the symbolic work that participating in this ridicule and stereotypes does in 'Othering' bad or poor parents and producing distance from 'them'. A significant portion of *Supernanny* functions through humour, though the matter of *who* is laughing, and at *what*, is no even matter. Humour itself is an immensely complex vehicle; at times twinned with ridicule, at others pathos, sometimes producing distance, sometimes collapsing that distance. These are the complexities I turn to here.

In this chapter, I explore the humour and pleasures that circulated around and through viewing *Supernanny*; and, importantly, the attendant darker sides of ridicule, such as ambivalence, anxiety and shame. The pleasures of mocking and cutting Jo Frost the *Supernanny* 'to size' and of laughing at the on-screen families were, I argue, ambivalent,

partial and unfinished. These pleasures were enacted within richly textured psychosocial landscapes (Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine, 2003) and they involved projection, recognitions and vicarious shame. There was a good deal of affective psychosocial 'matter' in these viewing encounters – emotional, non-verbal, 'damp' (Munt, 2007) – that could not be contained by the notion of the hyper-rational, knowing subject of audience studies (and of neo-liberal parenting culture). In Chapter 7, I explored some of the ways in which participants tried to construct themselves as critical viewers and how they used their viewing experience as an opportunity to create a sense of themselves as not 'taken in' by the artifice of the programme. There is, I would argue, a parallel between these constructions and much social and cultural theory. As Stephen Frosh (2002) points out, in much structuralist and poststructuralist social theory (particularly from the 1980s and 1990s), the concern to be rigorous and to see through ideology – rather than being 'taken in' by it – created theory that was unsentimental, detached, icy, even anti-humanist. Frosh notes that this embrace of high theory was usually at the expense of the empirical and the personal, resulting in the disappearance and even disowning by social theory of those that are supposed to its subjects. I explored some of these issues and their consequences for cultural theory in Chapter 3, pointing to the limits of both the psychological subject of film studies and the sociological subject of cultural theory. I suggested in Chapter 3 that it is cultural and social research that takes a psychosocial approach, such as Valerie Walkerdine's (1990, 2003), that begins to adequately complicate and examine processes of subjectification which are *both* exterior and interior, discursive and psychic.

If we read what was said in the text-in-action sessions as the straightforward utterances of knowing, critical, savvy viewers, we risk overlooking the psychic lives of those speaking; the emotional and messy interior and unconscious processes and defensive mechanisms that exceed language. Taking a psychosocial approach to the data is one way of attempting to capture the complexity of experience that is *both* social and psychological, like the 'warp and weft of a piece of cloth' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000: 138). A psychosocial approach both 'fleshes out' the discursive subject of poststructuralist theory (McRobbie, 2005) and breathes sociological life and imagination (Mills, 1961) into psychoanalytically-informed cultural analysis. It allows us to use 'binocular vision' (Hollway, 1989), to remain sensitive to the complex interplay between the interior and social worlds of the subject. What is beyond discourse, language and representation? What can be said and what remains unspeakable? What can be personally 'owned' through speaking and where do absences and silences happen? Stephen Frosh is interested in the psychic matter that cannot be made to 'fit' within language, theory and self-narrative; by that which *exceeds*, 'in which the things that are said suggests the existence of other things, beyond or at least different from that articulation' (2002: 18). Frosh describes his psychosocial approach as 'a psychology of hinting', and it is this kind of orientation which I take in this chapter, exploring in more depth what did not fit within the constructions of rationality (examined in the preceding Chapter). As Frosh comments, the excessive and irrational parts of experience require a different kind of orientation, one which can excavate an affective realm:

Talking is not quite the same as being, and one of the deepest impulses and aggravations of human subjectivity is the feeling that it is not quite possible to put reality into words.

Language acts, does, produces, makes meanings; but it also, at the edges, fails. (2002: 16)

Taking a psychosocial approach to the text-in-action data was a way of bridging distinctions between interior and exterior worlds. I was interested in the places where parents claimed 'not to know' how they felt about something; a claim which usually prefaced a more elaborate and articulate response. Although they knew very well how they felt, 'not knowing' utterances can be seen psychosocially as a mechanism to protect oneself from difficult or painful knowledge, of distancing oneself from strong feelings, as well as pointing to the haunting presence of what you *should* feel (Nichter, 2000). This approach was also a way of attending to the ways in which the viewing encounters with bad mothers on the screen reproduced discursive and psychic landscapes of good and bad parenting, through the messy and partial processes of disavowal, disowning and projection. I draw on these concepts as set out by the school of psychoanalytic object relations, which takes a departure from Freud's drive theory, via the work of Melanie Klein (Mitchell, 1986) and employed by contemporary psychosocial theorists (Hoggett, 1992; Lucey and Reay, 2000; Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine, 2003). Whilst Klein's work, importantly, is conceptually distinct from object relations, her work on the dynamism and fluidity of splitting and projection has had profound influence on the subsequent object relations school, as well as on the broad field of psychosocial studies. Kleinian projection entails the expulsion of unwanted material onto others; the disowning and externalising of our own faults, the faults that are too costly

for us to bear. Klein's conceptual dyad of projective and introjective processes point us towards the ways in which the boundaries between selves and others are permeable and flexible, generative and transformative (Bondi, 2003). In object relations, our interior space is held to be populated with objects, psychic representations of ourselves and others in the world, and parts of those selves and others. Our interactions in the world bear the impression of these psychic objects and our need to relate to others mobilises these unknowable interior dramas. In other words, our interiorised unconscious relationships both mediate and animate our experiences of the world and our relationships with others.

Whilst there are obvious problems with moving freely between the conscious and unconscious, affect and emotion, I want to use Klein's notion of projection and the ways in which it has been fruitfully employed by psychosocial theorists as a way of thinking about what the screen mothers of the programme *do* for the mothers watching, and what they hold for them; principally, that the bad mothers on the *Supernanny* screen serve as generative figures for the mothers watching. I want to focus on a few examples that illuminate the messy and partial nature of this projection – how the on-screen mothers are never quite bad-enough, how laughing at them is never entirely comfortable – and tease out the complex emotional textures that circulated through these partial projections. In particular, I want to explore the humour, ridicule and (self-)mockery which the encounter with the programme appeared to invite; humour which seemed almost obligatory, and which also, I suggest, disguised and displaced more painful feelings. I also examine what I saw as pragmatic shifts in the affective registers that participants spoke in; from feelings of

vicarious shame and exposure, as if what was happening on the screen was somehow felt to reveal one's own fraught parental life, to sudden expressions of irritation and annoyance. Later in this chapter, I explore what the shift to irritation does, or rather permits one *to not do*; that is, to feel anger and rage at the demands and requirements of contemporary parenting culture.

Social functions of humour and ridicule

The rate at which images, jokes and stories, such as the chainmail, are disseminated and proliferate (particularly online) indicates the contagious quality and power of the kind of post-ironic visual humour which populates contemporary culture, particularly around gender and social class. As many social theorists have argued, we need to pay attention to the significance and functions of humour, particularly when it takes the form of ridicule, as a means for producing and displaying group identity and loyalty (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Holmes, 2000), upholding social and cultural conventions and cementing social relations in times of uncertainty and anxiety (Billig, 2005). In her analysis of the comedy programme *Little Britain*, Deborah Finding (2008) argues that the humour targets stereotyped Others, rather than being self-deprecating or a-political; and that through this 'othering' process, the programme makes returns to sexist, homophobic, classed and racist sentiments. Finding argues that this return is made acceptable through irony; we 'know'

that this is offensive, and the hilarity comes through playing with the boundaries of offence. This strand of comedy is excused, even celebrated, through recourse to the explanatory power of 'daring' post-PC irony – the naughty pleasures of returning to the 'good old days' of comedy. The context in which such post-PC irony flourishes is one which is post-feminist, post-racial, post-modern, and the achingly savvy subject both knows and intentionally teases at the borders of good taste. As such, making a critique becomes particularly difficult, since critique is pre-empted – can't you take a 'joke'? – and itself caricatured already as po-faced 'political correctness' (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004) or 'killjoy feminism' (Ahmed, forthcoming).

When we look more closely at the content of this post-PC humour, we find sites of intense social anxiety. Imogen Tyler (2008) explores the classed caricature of the promiscuous fecundity of the white working-class/'underclass' woman – figured as the 'chav mum' – who is imagined to be, literally, social waste, to contribute nothing of value and to produce nothing except babies, which she then fails to raise 'properly'. The exemplary 'chav mum' is a *Little Britain* character also – Vicky Pollard, a permanently pregnant schoolgirl depicted as lazy, feckless and stupid. The chav phenomenon¹ went far beyond a television programme however, and leaked out into online forums, broadsheet newspapers, advertising and themed social events. Tyler argues that although this caricature is not

¹ By 'chav phenomenon' I do not refer to the 'actual' existence of 'real' chavs (although this material 'proof' was constantly sought and claimed by commentators and journalists promising 'the Real Vicky Pollard', see Tyler, 2008 for a discussion) but rather to the almost hysterical cultural obsession with the category. 'Chav' was pronounced 'Word of the Year' in 2004 by the Oxford English Dictionary (Dent, 2004) and added to the Collins English dictionary a year later.

representative of the social world, it is neither unmoored from it entirely. Rather it speaks to, and circulates, anxieties around fertility and social class. Tyler uses the term 'figure' to refer to an intersection between bodies and representations, which 'describes the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments, specific bodies become overdetermined and are publicly imagined and represented (are 'figured') in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways that are symptomatic or expressive of an underlying crisis or anxiety' (2008: 18). What, then, is being 'figured' by jokes such as the one I received by email, is an anxiety and crisis around appropriate parenting, social class, value.

I argue that the kind of humours and pleasures that circulate around *Supernanny* and parenting television are enmeshed with the humour and pleasures that circulate around the chav mum. The chav mum is figured as social waste, as a financial parasite and importantly as unchanging and unchangeable. She is figured as the consequence, and subsequent creator, of an endless stream of socially useless subjects, 'the underclass', who through their lack of morality, lack of discipline, and lack of governance remain static on the fringes of society. The mother who appears on *Supernanny* intersects with this in some ways, in terms of her spatially and temporally chaotic home and her unruly kids; but significantly her narrative is one of *transformation*, seizing the initiative to seek professional expertise and guidance and determined to effect governance upon her life, her family and her value as a neoliberal subject. It is, I would cautiously suggest, harder to create a clear, comfortable distance with the on-screen mother as a viewer of the programme, however 'critically' one wishes to view. The advisory conventions of the programme – camera framing, narrative

voiceover and so on – mean that it is not only *her* on screen but also *me* as a viewer who is being cajoled, corralled and propelled towards the proper use of naughty steps and starcharts. We are invited to pass judgement as viewer/jury of the programme (Skeggs and Wood, 2006) but the distinction between jury and defendant can be porous; the popular pedagogy invited by this genre of programming means we are all potential makeover subjects.

Even though the viewing participants approached the text critically and questioned its authority (see previous Chapter), they all had moments during viewing where the on-screen action prompted them to verbally (and non-verbally) articulate their anxiety, where projections onto the screen mothers fell apart, and where they were themselves shamed. This happened *in spite of* the ways in which they all fulfilled the popular social criteria of ‘good’ (responsible, reflexive, autonomous) mothering. Despite their fantasies of critical mastery over the programme, it nonetheless ‘touched a nerve’. In her work with new mothers, Tina Miller (2007) found that a gendered sense of crisis characterised their first forays into public space, where their mothering could be witnessed and assessed by others. Even though Miller’s participants appeared to objectively satisfy the common social criteria of being ‘good mothers’ – they were not too young, not too old, they were married/partnered, financially autonomous, and so on – they nevertheless all told stories of experiencing their mothering as precarious, anxious, and punctuated by feelings of judgement. In Miller’s subsequent research with fathers, she did not find the same parallel anxieties; new fathers, rather, narrated their first public appearances with their babies in

terms of pride and the pleasurable experience of receiving public admiration from others (Miller, 2009). The gendered anxiety around being judged as inadequate or incompetent would seem related to contemporary expectations about who does parenting work. The father who knows the name of his child's paediatrician is likely to be applauded as a saint, whilst the mother who does not is likely to be interpreted as a sinner².

The responses to parenting television hinged on the tensions of two co-existing, and sometimes competing, affective pulls. One circles around expressions of relief and reassurance that 'at least' my children are not as bad as that, and would seem to suggest that the televisual family can be held at a critical distance, as an example and illustration of what it would mean to *really* be failing as a parent. The other affective pull was around expressions of feeling a commonality with 'failure' at an experiential level. This commonality was expressed through sympathetic or empathetic statements, confessions of one's own 'bad parenting', or ironic admissions that we all perhaps need the Supernanny to visit us.

These affective pulls, of critical distance and empathetic commonality, circulate and rehearse cultural ambivalences about what bad parenting is and who the bad parents are. Is

² Although this was not a central research aim, and my data is not extensive enough to extrapolate this, it is nonetheless worth noting again how difficult it proved to enlist fathers for the research. As I discussed in Chapter 7, this may be related to the specific ways in which *Supernanny* is produced for a (female) gendered parenting audience, or to the ways in which, despite the gender-neutral verb, 'parenting' culture continues to speak to mothering more than fathering (see Sunderland, 2006). The encounters between fathers and parenting culture and expertise would be a fruitful avenue for further investigation.

it 'us' or is it 'them'? Is it those families on the screen or is it us, the watchers? Within the site of the parenting television text, we might reasonably wish to interpret a transformational narrative around parenting as the desire to erase failure altogether. In this interpretation, failure in the text becomes unthinkable, superfluous, an unwelcome aspect of family life that must be purged, both from 'them' and 'us'. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 4, we can also interpret the ruthless editing of the narrative as an attempt to silence the ambivalence, partiality or potential endlessness of transformation. Through carving up the material of intimate family life, these narratives endeavour to offer up a seamless, tidy and *successful* conclusion at all costs.

The pleasures of the text

In light of all the evasiveness around the frequency and fanaticism of watching that I explored in Chapter 7, and of the ways in which *Supernanny* as a programme was located at the bottom of a cultural economy of parenting advice, it might be expected that the comments made by participants during the viewing sessions themselves would be only critical, joyless or disapproving. This is certainly what I was expecting during the interviews; but what happened once viewing began was far more complicated than this, with participants taking a great deal of pleasure in the programme. These pleasures involved lots of laughter, gasping and other affective expressions of delight or outrage,

which were sometimes converted subsequently into more elaborate moral judgements.

These pleasures were not straightforward though, but were fragile, mobile and tied up with the costs of watching; which included the potential for recognising oneself on the screen and all the negative emotions that might be invoked in such a recognition. I will now explore the fragility of these pleasures, and the ways in which they were always intimately linked to these other emotions, particularly shame and guilt.

The most significant, and constant, site for pleasure was the figure of the Supernanny Jo Frost herself. Frost's authority was challenged at many points by the parents watching her (as it is challenged across other sites such as newspapers, magazines, webforums and other extra-textual places), but she was also mocked and held up to ridicule. Her body was scrutinised and assessed, as were her clothes, particularly the suit she wears on her first visit to the family;

Elizabeth: I think, as Supernanny's become more popular, she's grown bigger and bigger.

Clara: What, fatter?

[laughter]

Clara: Didn't she go to America?

Elizabeth: Its all that champagne and fried food!

[from viewing session, fill in TIA]

Susan: Look at those shorts!

Jane: Obviously got no qualms about her body shape

Louisa: this suited and booted thing is sort of...male fantasy isn't it?

Fiona: Did anyone see the one about dogs? With the woman dressed in leather?

Susan: Oh...*Its Me or the Dog?*

Several: Yeah!

Fiona: It's the same thing. Striding down the road, power dressing.

Susan: *She* wears nice dresses though.

The 'power-suit' that Frost wears on her first visit, and in much of the promotional material for the programme, as well as on the covers of her first two books – *Supernanny: how to get the best from your children* (2005) and *Ask Supernanny: what every parent wants to know* (2006) – has also been focused upon by some journalists, who have seen it as 'dominatrix' styling (Aitkenhead, 2006) or as excessive femininity (Carey, 2007). To be 'suited and booted' or to be power-dressing invoked complex reactions; it was seen variously as playing with femininity as a kind of power over male viewers, playing up to the cameras and associated with being brash, forthright and strident. The power-suit, which is only worn by Frost on the first visit, becomes a visual metaphor for the disturbances wrought by a professional outsider, entering the privacy of the home. But these comments are not about Frost's professional intrusion; these comments also circle upon her *masquerade* of professionalism. There is also a significant echo in these comments of the ways in which working-class

glamour and femininity can be derided and dismissed by comfortably middle-class women. Frost's working-class identity, as we will recall from the previous chapter, located her on a much lower rung of the expertise ladder in comparison to other 'alpha' (middle-class) experts. The derisory comments made here, comparing Frost's suit with the better, 'nicer' outfits worn by (middle-class) experts in other programmes, add another affective layer to these encounters, with the dismissal her masquerade witheringly and with something approaching disgust constituting the middle-classness of the viewer (Lawler, 2005b).

These were ways of limiting the symbolic havoc that Frost, striding down the road in her suit, ready to deliver her parenting verdict, holds over viewers. These dismissive and sometimes cruel comments about Frost's body and appearance reveal the complex interrelations of anxiety and pleasure that her entrance engenders. Even more than her appearance, it was Frost's accent, mispronunciations and manner of speaking that was referred to during viewing, and in some cases imitated, by participants. I felt each of these imitations balloon into significance, and in the recordings of the sessions the echoes of Frost's 'Estuary English' seemed to be echoed only by the tones of my Essex accent:

Phillip: Unacceptable. That's what Jo can't say say isn't it? Unacceptable.

Helen: And her grammar is *appalling*. She might teach them manners but she certainly doesn't teach them the English language. The *we wasn't*, and *them knows*. (from interview)

Susan: this is what does my head in. The way she talks. (*imitating Frost saying 'talking'*)

Taw-king

(from viewing session)

These exchanges are not simply a matter of condescension, but are also perhaps of desperation. Frost's arrival on the screen unsettles those who are watching. This confident and self-assured woman is not simply a saviour to the parents on the screen, but is also, momentarily, temporarily and complexly, a villain for those watching. She represents the possibility of being criticised, of having one's parenting undermined and one's authority being challenged. The sadism and cruelty of the programme is bound up with the very message of parental empowerment it appears to offer. Faced with the possibility of these painful messages, the participants reply to Frost by mocking and ridiculing her, by questioning the legitimacy of her message and by 'retreating into class and taste-based superiority' (Moseley, 2000). The act of performing disdain for Frost's mispronunciations – as well as comments on her appearance, her body and her parenting techniques – are an important way of holding her, her advice and her programme at a distance from oneself. The following exchange I think illuminates this most clearly:

Susan: The problem I have with Supernanny I have, right. What are her qualifications?

Jane: I think, she's been a nanny for so-and-so number of years?

Susan: Yeah, but she's not a child psychologist.

Kelly: [to screen] My god.

Fiona: [to Susan] But, does it matter if it works?

[to screen] What was she saying?

Susan: (*imitating*) I was *livid* with you! I was ab-so-lute-ly livid with you!

Fiona: What's the word again?

Susan: Unacceptable!

[All laugh]

Both Jane and Fiona challenge Susan's dismissal of Frost's authority, suggesting that both her experience as a nanny and the (apparently) positive results for participating families may be more significant than professional qualifications. Susan responds by seizing upon an opportunity for ridicule, imitating the on-screen dialogue, and Fiona joins in, asking for a reminder of 'that word' ('unacceptable', a word Frost famously mispronounces). Everyone succumbs to laughter. The discussion of whether Supernanny's approach works emerges again after this group have seen the episode, but again this discussion is neutralised through ridicule and alongside the pleasures of imitating and mocking Frost.

Susan: She's not said *unasseptable* yet. I'm a bit worried you've found the *one* episode where she doesn't say it.

[All laugh]

Anticipating the moment where Frost says *that word*, and performing a mock frustration that this episode of the programme might be the one where she does *not* say it, becomes – for

this group of participants at least – an opportunity to hold Frost and her troubling entrance into family life at a safe distance. It becomes an opportunity to puncture the satisfaction of the programme, to bring her down to a more tolerable level, to cut her down to size – as indeed Frost cuts the on-screen parents down to size. For the programme – however carefully participants were able to account for their viewing as accidental, non-fanatic, non-religious, or a guilty pleasure – was troubling and did evoke more difficult and complex feelings at certain points in the narrative. In the next section, I explore in particular the moments, both during viewing and after, in which the pleasurable possibilities of judging those on the screen spilled over into painful moments of introspection and confession; particularly through the feeling of shame.

‘Watching from behind my hands’; the place of shame

The pleasures of watching ‘them on the screen’ against whom a distance with oneself could be drawn was for some participants fraught with emotional complexity. Some spoke of the relief that they felt when watching the programme, because when they watched another parent failing, they were not watching themselves failing. They spoke of relief that their children were not on the screen, and that they were not the parents on the screen.

But speaking with relief that they were, at least, not on the screen, did not guarantee that they would not recognize themselves or their children on the programme. Watching other parents 'fail' (according to the parameters of the programme, at least) was risky because it might echo your own daily experiences of 'failing', or remind you of uncomfortable memories of 'failing' in the past, or it might curse or jinx you with regards to future parenting 'failures'. Articulating the pleasures of watching were often intimately linked with articulating the dread of recognition;

Patrizia: I'm kind of fascinated and kind of terrified

Elizabeth: See there's no point in asking why. He's not going to be able to rationalise.

Patrizia: I have said that to [son] though

(pause)

Patrizia: You don't always find yourself entirely in there...but in bits and pieces you do of course find yourself. (during viewing)

These encounters were saturated with the ambivalent experience of shame. The shame of *Supernanny* is multi-layered; during an episode we watch children behave in ways that their parents speak of being ashamed of; the shame of failing to take control of escalating situations; the shaming of these parents by Jo Frost who tells them that *she* is ashamed by what she has seen; parents are confronted time and time again by the shaming video footage of what they are doing wrong.

Sara Ahmed (2004) suggests that shame is an ambivalent emotion which has a double meaning; to be both exposed and concealed. The shamed subject, burning with the sensation of shame, drops her gaze or turns away, and yet she remains exposed. It is the exposure which is shaming; to be witnessed having done something terrible. Being alone does not erase the experience of shame, since the 'witness' continues to be imagined. The many layers of looking in *Supernanny* incite the unending nature of shame; even when Jo Frost has left the building, the camera remains, sometimes even wall-mounted and equipped with night-vision, and so we continue to witness. The episodes are driven forward narratively when Frost returns with yet more footage filmed during her absence and on-screen parents are freshly shamed. The re-circulation of shame sometimes became unbearable:

Erica: I'm sorry, but bugger that. See, that's why I stopped watching this programme.

Because its, its...quite emotional for me. I've done this with [daughter]. I don't need to watch it on TV. I've done it with my own child. I don't want to watch it in the evening.

Vanina: I'm very aware of my own limitations. Like feeling caught between two sides of the family. And people telling me what I'm doing wrong. I'm still very self-conscious of my limitations. I think I can't bear to watch, because it reminds me of being very aware of... As much as I agree that its unthinkable for a nine year old. It just reminds me of being told I was wrong.

For both Vanina and Erica, both of whom are tenuously self-defined as middle-class (Vanina's complicated as a migrant, Erica upwardly mobile through her job in a classroom) watching the shame of the on-screen mother reminds them of their own painful feelings of self-consciousness; they too are shamed, and they attempt to articulate the feelings engendered by this sequence. Ahmed suggests that these emotions do not emanate from within the subject, nor do they come from an external source, but rather are produced in the interactions between surfaces. It is through Erica and Vanina's encounter with *Supernanny* that the feeling of shame has circulated. Emotions are relational; 'words for feeling, and objects for feeling, circulate and generate effects' (Ahmed, 2004: 14). *Supernanny* and the viewing context I requested the respondents be part of generated emotional effects which were complicated. Shame involves seeing oneself through the eyes of a real or imagined witness, as a turning on *of* oneself *towards* oneself in judgement for failing to live up to an ideal.

The pleasures of watching 'them on the screen' against whom a distance with oneself could be drawn was for some participants fraught with emotional complexity. It is important to note that nearly all the parents who participated in this research stated during interview that although they had watched *Supernanny* before, they would not consider themselves 'fans' or regular viewers; even though many of them demonstrated a good deal of familiarity with the programme, referred to other episodes they had watched and so on. Most were also hesitant, in interview, with claiming any viewing pleasures; although again this was complicated by the affective pleasures they demonstrated during viewing. Some

participants spoke of their relief that they could watch another parent failing, and of their relief that it was not them on the screen. But this relief was precarious and shadowed by the possibility that they might 'see themselves up there'. Some participants spoke of their anxieties that watching might curse or jinx them, that laughing at or enjoying another parent's failings on the screen might have 'karmic' costs and they might come to recognise themselves in the future.

Any pleasures were precarious and unfinished. The distinctions between 'us' and 'them', between failing on-screen family and failing viewer were felt to be porous. Good and bad mothers may mutate into one another; both in terms of a psychologised television makeover (where bad mothers become good mothers with the help of *Supernanny*) – but also in terms of the partiality with which any projection might be made. A gasp of outrage may, moments later, become the red-faced acknowledgement of similarity. One participant, Helen, made several statements of judgement about the on-screen family during the first few minutes of our viewing session (Series 3, Episode 3), remarking on the 'lethal stairwell', the excessive cleanliness of the house which she found 'unnerving', and gasping 'no' theatrically when the father admitted that he had never read to his two sons. In response to a montage of the two boys walking to school, she exclaimed:

Helen: You do think, how can people *live* like that? Its just *crazy*.

Through several expressions of her disgust and outrage, Helen is able to do a degree of distancing work in a short space of time, creating (what seems to be) a firm sense of herself as different from the on-screen family. Yet within a few minutes, Helen quietly said to her husband, who was also taking part in the session, 'that's me, isn't it?' Something about the narrative had unsettled Helen, and the disquiet of recognition prevented her from continuing with her distancing remarks. Instead, many of her subsequent comments were concerned with whether or not her parenting style was in fact similar to the father she had initially been outraged by, and she was concerned to find ways to draw finely coded distinctions between this man on the screen who she continued to want to hold at a distance, yet felt increasingly unable to, and her own 'good' mothering. The slippery projections, illustrated in Helen's shifting register from distance to disquiet, happened at other points across the other viewing sessions. Like Helen, these attempts to make distinctions between on-screen parents, and themselves, the parents watching, were not always entirely successful. Security in one's own parental competence, for many of the viewers, waxed and waned throughout viewing of the episode:

Vanina: I don't like watching this. I don't think I can bear to watch this.

TJ: Why not?

Vanina: Because...because this is not rational television! A stranger in your house...telling your child what's acceptable. I don't know.

My viewing session with Louisa demonstrated too the deep complexity and ambivalence with which notions of good and bad mothering can be claimed and held on to. Louisa demonstrated clearly the many different layers of meaning that the programme had for her and the reasons, often uncomfortable, that she watched and felt invested in the format.

Louisa: And partly its like, thank god my kid *isn't* like that. But partly, you are trying to pick up some tips, how *not* to be like that....and then on the other hand, its pure entertainment. And there's a little bit of *schadenfreude*, isn't there, watching someone else slip in the poo. Thank god that's not me, you know? And then you think, some people actually have to *learn* this. I mean, who *are* these weirdos?

Emma: That's not very nice.

Louisa: No? Well, but *come on*.

Louisa performs a kind of relief ('thank god that's not me'), and during the episode viewing itself, she also performs her agony over whether she is able to watch, why she is watching, how unbearable she is finding it and what it might mean that she continues to watch. It is Louisa who claimed to be 'watching with my hands over my eyes'. But her performance of relief is haunted by the apparently easy contempt that she persisted with for 'these weirdos', and the ritualistic 'bad mother talk' that she too engages in. Who are these people, she asks again and again, even after her partner Emma reprimands her for not being very nice. When I first examined the material generated from my interview and text-in-

action session with Louisa, I read her comments as expressions of contempt, even arrogance. At first, I felt that she was holding 'these weirdos' at a distance only because she was able to think of the on-screen mothers as value-less and incompetent, and because she was able to feel secure in her own competence. When I looked again, more carefully and across our entire conversation, I found that there were alternative ways to interpret Louisa's encounter with *Supernanny*.

Far from feeling secure in her own parental competence, Louisa's interview was saturated with her uncertainty. As a lesbian mother, she initially positioned herself outside of parenting advice, declaring that it had little of relevance for her and her partner, by dint of its heterosexual presumptions. Louisa remarked that as soon as she reads the word 'dad' in parenting advice, she 'just dismissed it, really'. She anticipates that the problems her family will face are likely to be 'so different' from anything a (heterosexual) parenting expert might know about, that she doubts she will find anything useful there. In this way, Louisa is able to mobilise her queerness, her lesbian identity, as the grounds upon which she can remain outside of parenting advice and the anxiety she feels it engenders. In her agentic account of herself, her sexuality acts as another resource, alongside her other cultural capitals and resources, through which she can reject the anxious parenting industry.

But Louisa's rejection of parenting expertise and her secure account of herself as a competent parent is not entirely robust. Later in the interview she tells a story of her ordeal with a friend's parents who were due to meet her, her partner and their baby son.

Prior to the arranged meeting, her friend confessed that her parents had already voiced their homophobic doubts around lesbian parenting. When telling this story, Louisa repeated the question that her friend had repeated to her; 'what are they *doing* to that child?' For obvious reasons, Louisa found the meeting a trial of both managing her emotions and worrying how she was being interpreted by her friend's parents; of hyper-vigilance and self-consciousness. It acted as a reminder that her 'own world of normality' is not always granted a normative status, or in her words:

Occasionally you see yourself through other people's eyes and then you think, oh god, they think we're freaks. They think we're weirdos.

What I find instructive here is the repetition of the word 'weirdos'. Louisa used this very word when discussing the people who needed to be told how to do what she considered basic parenting tasks, people who were unable to follow what she considered the most rudimentary of parenting instincts. Louisa's decree that these people are 'weirdos' acquires I think a new level of projective complexity in light of her own experiences of feeling like a 'weirdo', or rather, feeling the projections of 'weirdo' upon her, by homophobic others. Her own negative feelings of being judged as (possibly) inadequate, or at least problematic, of feeling self-conscious and hyper-vigilant as a parent are not transformed into a reticence about judging other parents on *Supernanny*. Instead, the feelings they invoke in her, of feeling like a 'weirdo', serve her with the very terms she projects onto others.

Louisa partially revised her initial decree about 'these weirdos' after viewing a mother who was not quite bad-enough to be cast out. I would suggest that this revision is partly at least about social class and agency. Louisa and I watched one of the few *Supernanny* families that are not easily readable in terms of social class, Caroline and Sonny of Series 2. Over the course of viewing, Louisa's pleasure shifted from schadenfreude to recognition, but this prompted a great deal of anxious talk. Louisa ruminated over this at length afterwards.

Louisa: You're not judging them, are you...well, I suppose you *are*...but you're sort of willing it to turn out...especially when they seem really nice and well-meaning [...] and *they* did seem very sweet and well-meaning and they *desperately* wanted to do the right thing [...] I think it depends on who the parents are and whether you like them or not [...] There is this sort of anxiety about it. You *really* want it to turn out alright. I was really empathising with the mother in that one [...] Sometimes in those episodes, they're very obviously doing the wrong thing, and you can be a bit more judgemental about it? I mean. One doesn't *want* to be judgemental, but *obviously* we all are. But in that particular episode, I sort of felt their pain a bit [...] you're on their side. But with some of them, you almost sort of *enjoy* it when she tells them off a bit.

Louisa draws very careful and hesitant distinctions between the parents whose pain she can feel and those whose pain she can enjoy. There is an unspoken classed dimension to the distinctions she draws between who she will judge and who she can empathise with; her

terms are nice, sweet and well-meaning, but I would argue that what she means is middle-class and agentic. Although Louisa does not explicitly reference social class, I would follow other theorists (Reay, 2004; Skeggs, Woods and Thumim, 2008) and suggest nonetheless that social class is the animating vector of difference. These are the terms in which she tries to narrate her own mothering decisions. But I also think her ruminations must be analysed in light of the postfeminist climate of advice in which she lives and operates, in which self-surveillance and self-transformation are the central tropes of being in the world, and in which evaluative capitals are prized and assumed of people, and parents, weighing up and choosing the philosophies and lifestyles they want to live by. I want now to examine how this postfeminism landscape operates in relation to ritualistic self-mockery and ironic confessions of being a bad mother.

Parenting television and obligatory humour

There are powerful resonances between the kinds of contradictory and coexistent statements made in these sessions about parenting, and the kinds of statements made by young girls about their weight, as we can see in the work of Mimi Nichter (2000). In her ethnographic work, Nichter observed that girls spoke with 'inconsistencies of voice' (2000: 18), at some points declaring that they did not care what anyone thought about them, at others wishing they were thinner. These girls engaged in what Nichter called 'fat talk';

saying 'I'm so fat' constantly, identifying and naming their flaws, verbally dismembering themselves and others. Nichter argued that this kind of fat talk is ritualistic, rapport-building; and that importantly, limited to girls who are not fat. In a similar way, I would argue that these contradictory statements around 'not caring' about parenting advice or television, whilst also confessing to being a 'crap mum' or 'rubbish at parenting' perform a ritualistic psychosocial function. These parents must rein in the competitiveness and envy that are the by-products of parenting culture, and disguise these feelings by performing nonchalance about parental 'success' or by insisting that they are bad mothers too.

Even though, as I explored in the previous chapter, most of the participants narrated themselves as autonomous agents with a critical relationship with parenting advice, they were all touched by it. They all engaged in ritualistic talk about how bad their own mothering was, and several suggested that they too could do with a visit from Jo Frost. As I have suggested, humour, ridicule and mockery, whether directed at others or towards oneself, is intimately threaded through with more painful and difficult feelings; of shame, guilt, anxieties about failure, envy and rage. This kind of obligatory postfeminist humour is one of the strategies that was used in an attempt to master these darker attendant aspects of parenting. This can be seen in other cultural spaces, for example in an online space called Bad Mothers Club (BMC), in which mothers are invited to take up the mantle of failure with pride, to celebrate their own transgressions of alpha-womanhood, to liberate oneself from the drudgery of maternal expectation with a knowing wink. In a vein similar to many 'momoirs', 'mummylit' or confessional writing around motherhood, the BMC recipes

enact a particular relationship to badness but this badness is highly circumscribed. In a 'Bad Housekeeping Institute' recipe section, self-identified 'bad mothers' have posted recipes including the following instructions;

Pour in a good splash of sherry or rum. Each year I seem to add more, but that's marriage for you.

NB: Mr S says he relaxes with a drink while making this, and I can confirm that it's almost impossible to fuck up, even if you're quite pissed.

Repeat until all the mixture is used up, finishing with a layer of flake. Eat remaining flakes before your children see them.

Sprinkle with toasted pine nuts if you can be arsed.

Identifying oneself as a 'bad mother' – both in response to *Supernanny* and by posting on the BMC web-boards – is different from being identified as a 'poor parent'. To appear on the programme, the on-screen parents of *Supernanny* must volunteer themselves and go through a selection process in which they must perform their desperation to participate and take up a specific subjectivity as designated by the application process. I experimented with this subjectivity in an attempt to participate in the programme, but ultimately failed to convince the researchers that I needed Frost's help, partly through my own discomfort (Jensen,

2008). My own experiences with my behavioural support programmes offered in the education setting have illustrated the painful terms in which this label of poor parent are ascribed by surveillant others, rather than adopted voluntarily by parents in the spirit of self-mockery; as in the kind we can observe in the BMC space.

Importantly, the voluntary uptake of a 'bad mother' label implies a certain comfort with playing with these labels, in ways that are unlikely to be ascribed by powerful others, such as teachers, social workers and parenting practitioners. Only 'good' (middle-class, white, heterosexual, financially autonomous) mothers can comfortably engage in bad mother talk in the same way that only girls who are not fat can engage in fat talk. And indeed, engaging in this talk is *itself* constitutive of good mothering; the ironic confessions within the recipes above are within healthy, nutritious recipes, the cornerstone of good mothering. Much of the content of the BMC web-boards concerns the exhaustive discussions of minute aspects of parenting life, prompting advice that is centred upon the ideology of intensive mothering. This resonates throughout postfeminist parenting culture, across the recent surge of bad mother 'momoirs' and tales of 'beta-motherhood' (Paesal, 2006; Williams, 2006). The anticipation and ironic dissection of 'good mothering' does not dismantle parenting culture, however; it merely displaces, disguises and dismisses anger at this parenting culture.

From shame and humour to irritation

As I have discussed, the viewing encounters were saturated with the ambivalent experience of shame. Returning to the content of the programme, the shame on the *Supernanny* screen is multi-layered; during an episode we watch children behave in ways that their parents speak of being ashamed of; the shame of failing to take control of escalating situations; the shaming of these parents by the Supernanny Jo Frost who tells them that *she* is ashamed by what she has seen; during the course of the episode parents are confronted over and over again by shaming video footage of the moments they have failed to implement behavioural strategies in the Supernanny's absence.

For Sally Munt, shame is about 'self-attention, induced by another' (2007: 8). Once this attention has been induced, shame, of all the emotions, is the stickiest; she says 'it travels quickly, it has an infective, contagious property that means it can circulate and be exchanged with intensity' (2007: 3). In Spanish there is a term for this kind of vicarious shame – *vergüenza ajena* – the shame that one feels upon witnessing the shame of another, but there is no corresponding word in English³. The circulation and exchange of shame lent a difficult emotional texture to the session, which I was only really able to make partial sense of during transcription. Specific visual sequences in the programme were most obviously about the circulation of shame – long camera close-ups on parents' faces as Jo

³ My thanks to Aida Sanchez for offering a translation and explanation of this phrase.

Frost delivers her initial diagnosis of the family's problems or when confronted by shaming video footage in particular – and these sequences have been defined usefully as 'judgement shots' (Skeggs, Woods and Thumim, 2008). During these judgement shots, the text-in-action sound recordings were agonisingly quiet, compared to the almost continuous audio soundtrack cues, the sounds of children screaming and shouting, as well as the affective and outraged chatter from participants as they watched. Mothers participating in the text-in-action sessions sometimes covered their eyes or their mouths with their hands; Louisa, as I have noted already, remarked during one of these shaming judgement shots that she was 'watching with her hands over her eyes'.

Where did this shaming take subjects? What are the possibilities once vicarious shame has been exchanged? Like the shifts between projection and recognition that happened in the encounter, the affective shaming experiences that were invoked through watching the programme too shifted. In many instances, there was a distinct shift from shame to irritation, as the following exchange with another group of viewing mothers illustrates:

Jane: The worse they are at the beginning, the better [...] don't you find that you watch them, and you're *relieved* [...] and when it cuts back to the parents, and you're like right, whats wrong with them! And they're really nice and encouraging, and you're like *oh god!*

Kelly: The thing about *Supernanny* is just the stupid parents on them really.

Fiona: The closer they get to *Trisha* the more I have a problem with them.

Jane: But I think you watch them because you genuinely want them to become beautiful children, don't you, and the reunion and they realise what a shit they've been, and you want it to come around full circle, don't you?

Jane's performance of relief – that it is the parents on the screen who are failing, not her – is just as complex and fragile as Louisa's. She acknowledges here her own complicity with wider expectations that there is no such thing as bad children, only bad parents, and her panic when that expectation falls flat ('*oh god!*'). When good parents (that are nice and encouraging) and bad parents (who have out-of-control children) are one and the same, it not only confounds wider moral explanations of parental causality, it also disrupts Jane's own personal guarantees. The parents on the screen serve as a reminder to her that even if she does all the things she is 'supposed' to do, her children may yet embarrass her, behave badly or otherwise shame her. She solicits agreement from the rest of the group, punctuating her statements with 'don't you' but she does not receive it. Instead, both Kelly and Fiona express their *irritation* with the parents on parenting television; Kelly's annoyance is with their stupidity, while Fiona speaks exasperatingly of her 'problem' with the ones that remind her of the subjects on a popular daytime talk-show, *Trisha* (Channel 5, 2004-2009) hosted by Trisha Goddard.

I would argue that it is the *irritations* expressed by Jane and her peers that places limits upon the astute observations they made, at other points in the viewing session, about the injustices of the programme and of the unreasonable expectations they felt contemporary

parenting culture made of them. During viewing, this group responded to the episode (Series 2, Episode 11) at several points with expressions of empathy and understanding for the mother on screen, Heather. Jane and Fiona in particular pointed out that her husband worked long hours and she was alone with her children; that she may be depressed; that she too worked full-time and was exhausted. In short, they responded to the gaps in the narrative and the voiceover, challenging and talking over the explanations presented by the programme and filling it with their own, and making their expressions of sympathy, as the following exchange demonstrates:

Jane: She's around them a lot. She feels he's way out of the picture.

Fiona: She's mad at the dad.

Jane: Who *is* he to come back and start saying, start criticising?

Fiona: And yet *he'll* come back and see everything that's wrong, and *she'll* be resentful.

Jane and Fiona are drawing on their own experience, on pop-psychology and on cultural tropes of gender and family to flesh out an explanation which they are not satisfied with. But ultimately, in the post-viewing discussion, the moments of irritation they had felt outweighed the moments of sympathy and their impassioned challenges to the terms in which the Bixley family problems were psychologised and 'transformed' are re-articulated instead as a declaration to 'take on board' what they have seen on the screen. The irritations they felt towards Heather, and indeed the irritations that are invited by the cultural form of instructional television, I would argue prevented these women from

grounding the dissatisfactions they felt with the genre within a wider refusal or critique of parenting culture. Instead, the irritations serve as prompts that they must 'take on board', monitor and regulate their own parenting lives for the kinds of behaviours and problems that they found irritating.

Ugly feelings and the postfeminist maternal subject

In her exploration of the cultural forms which give rise to the 'less noble' emotions of envy, irritation, anxiety, Sianne Ngai (2005) points out that there has been a relative theoretical silence around these emotions, when compared to more powerful and politically mobilising emotions, such as anger. Ngai suggests that these 'dysphoric' affects are, in addition to being considered negative, associated with inaction and critically effete, 'flat' or affectively disorienting, amoral and petty. Ngai terms these collective dysphoric affects "ugly feelings", and focuses her analysis of each at cultural moments in which they seem to be particularly charged or at stake in symbolic struggles. Her analysis of envy is connected to contemporary feminist debates about the problems of expressions of aggression between feminist women. I would suggest that the 'ugly feeling' of irritation has a theoretical significance in terms of the postfeminist climate of parenting advice, in which it is the maternal, so hyper-visible and so public, that is used as an invitation for women to judge other women so readily.

Ngai begins her discussion of irritability with a quote from the philosopher Aristotle: “those people we call irritable are those who are irritated by the wrong things, more severely and for longer than is right” (Ngai, 2005: 175). The continuing dominance of bad mothers across representational and cultural fields, together with the postfeminist requirement to be endlessly self-surveilling oneself and one’s life, means that it is increasingly difficult for mothers to articulate their dissatisfactions with the everyday injustices of their lives as mothers. The angry maternal writing of second-wave feminism, which gave voice to the invisible labours of mothering and offered a semblance of collective feminist action, has been swamped by the contemporary tidal wave of how-to-parent instructional books, television programmes and websites. The bad mother – although apparently celebrated in confessional ‘mummylit’ with ironic abandon – remained in the encounters with these programmes a figure upon whom one’s own possible failings must be projected and against whom finely coded distinctions should be drawn.

It is through, I have suggested, the ‘ugly feelings’ that makeover television, with its invitation to postfeminist symbolic violence and ‘new cruelty’ (McRobbie, 2004) that the feminist possibilities of the programmes become stifled, and recast instead as requirements to transform oneself. In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate how critical theorists of postfeminist culture can intervene in these encounters, to excavate more fully the complexity of psychosocial projections and investments, and to attend to the damaging ways in which the psychologising turn within culture contributes to divisions between women. In spite of the problematic aspects of her work, Adrienne Rich was attuned to the potential

injury that the institution of motherhood could bring to bear upon mothers enmeshed within it; the 'terrible temptation' to endure the blame for the impossibility of fantasies of mothering. This terrible temptation has become the temptation to simply laugh at our abilities to live up to unattainable fantasies, and to deny the painful emotions that they evoke within us. Feminist theorists should remain suspicious of psychologised culture which continues to divide women into good, bad and better parents without attending to the expertise discourse that both decries and redeems parents enmeshed within it. Until, perhaps, we are able to watch 'bad' mothers without our hands covering our eyes in shame, refusing to be merely irritated and instead remaining angry, 'real' mothering will continue to lurk on the margins of culture.

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Chapter 9 – The Supernanny state?

It's the day or possibly two after I have given birth and the health visitor is due for her initial visit. My mum is tidying up, keen for the house to be spotless and ordered in time for her arrival. The health visitor arrives, coos over the baby, measures her, weighs her, asks me questions about my body, how things are going. She asks to check my stitches and my mum leaves the room, out of politeness and I guess partly out of embarrassment. At some point she hands me a questionnaire and explains that it is to determine whether I might need further visits and support. The questionnaire contains a range of questions to be answered on a scale of agreement; often, sometimes, rarely; strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. Each question is scored accordingly with points. The health visitor explains that scoring more than twelve points will be interpreted as a need for further support, which I have the right to take or reject. I answer the questions, with some trepidation, feeling already that my fitness as a parent is being assessed.

What I remember of this questionnaire is hazy, but some of the questions still stick in my mind¹. I remember that ticking 'I am a single parent' scored three points automatically, the maximum score. I also remember that the only other possible three-pointer was 'my partner or someone in my household is violent and/or abusive' (or words to that effect). I also remember being asked if I receive state benefits (one point), if I had ever been

¹ Exploratory research indicates that the questions I was asked were probably an amalgamation of the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale and other questions devised by the Southend CARE programme.

prescribed anti-depressant medication (two points) and a range of questions regarding feelings of anxiety, happiness and panic.

My final score was eleven. The health visitor seemed uncertain at this borderline score and suggested that I could request support if I wished. I declined. After she had left, I told my mum what had happened, red-faced and furious that simply by being a single parent I had racked up three points on this survey.

In this final concluding chapter, I want to draw together the themes of this thesis and also to explore where parenting culture has been taken in relationship to state-funded and regulated interventions. The politicization of parenting is more intense now than ever before; a Habermasian reading of parenting might suggest that this intimate sphere has been encroached upon by wider rationalization processes (Habermas, 1989). This is illustrated in the use of a 'points system' by health visitors in calculating and determining which new mothers may require further support. These systems endeavour to standardize intervention, to render it transparent and 'objective', yet in doing so the apparatus of power that underpin it becomes invisible. Who decides that being a single parent is worth three points? The subtle micro-politics of coercion also disappear; which mothers feel entitled to exercise their 'right' to reject recommended advice? Do some parents recognize that their refusal to co-operate, or to become a docile subject, may indeed have repercussions in itself? Before the visit of the health visitor, my mother, for example, instructed me to be polite, offer her a cup of tea, but 'get her out as soon as possible'. This

was not simply hostility, but a recognition that any recommendation for 'further support' might be hard for me to shake off and to resist. This recognition was a product of my mother's biography and her experience, and also of her classed and gendered identity as a working-class woman who had raised her children in a particular place, on a social housing estate in Southend², and at a particular time. This contrasted with the variety of ways in which my research participants framed parental support and interventions within the context of the parenting programme we watched together. Many participants stated that they agreed with the provision of parental support and interventions in *itself*, but that they were uncomfortable with this being provided through television, under the rubric of entertainment. Amy, for example, was very critical of the failure of the broadcaster Channel 4 to display details of parenting support helplines after the credits of *Supernanny*:

No, not even like, here's a Channel 4 help number to call if you've been affected by this programme. They should say, there is help. You can have this help, without *Supernanny*. You don't need a magic wand. You don't need someone from Channel 4. You can talk to your health visitor. Because I'm absolutely sure there are lots of people that would benefit from it.

² Southend, in the county of Essex, looms large in any map of classed disgust (Lawler, 2005b). The stereotype of 'Essex girl', a sexualized, promiscuous and stupid party girl (invariably called Tracey, to my irritation) has her own genre of jokes and never really went away, though she has been re-invigorated by the media obsession with the underclass (see Greer, 2001). This stereotype haunted my own pathway through higher education; on hearing the news that I had become pregnant a few months after graduating, one university friend remarked (though, rather cowardly, not to my face) that 'you can take the girl out of Essex but you can't take Essex out of the girl'. These spatialized class-making processes continue to be both painful and shameful to bear, as recent spatial ethnographies have demonstrated (Rooke and Gidley, forthcoming; Nayak 2003, 2006; Skeggs, 2004).

Amy, like many of my participants, spoke of her experience of parenting in terms of entitlement and agency. She had read many advice books, but had dismissed those she disliked or which did not fit with her worldview on childrearing. Her criticism of Channel 4, for not suggesting that viewers turn to their health visitor, implied that her own sense of health visitors was as benign advisors, whose advice one was not bound to, rather than as powerful surveillant Others who need to be treated with both respect and caution.

Yet despite the politicization of parenting, and shifts towards rationalization in many cases, there remains a governmental fear, demonstrated in discussion documents, speeches and public statements from government agents which I will explore in this chapter, of becoming caught in 'family values' debates. This has been most clearly illustrated within the accusations, and corresponding refusals, of acting as a 'Nanny state'. This phrase has proved particularly sticky for New Labour, and the accusation has been facilitated through the ways in which New Labour's priorities around raising aspiration and promoting egalitarianism has come to hinge increasingly around issues of parenting. What is at stake when the 'crisis of parenting', visually confirmed in programmes like *Supernanny*, is used and deployed by politicians to justify the extension of parenting interventions; interventions which may be coercive or punitive? I discuss some of the more salient aspects of this hinging now.

***Supernanny* and the reinvention of social work**

The interventions offered up by parenting television programmes such as *Supernanny* and their experts have clear, if complicated, resonances with official government-directed family interveners, who enter private homes in the form of social workers, health visitors and housing officers. Both promise to guide, help and sometimes 'save' the family, to mediate, observe and advise with the critical and objective distance of a professional outsider, and to do so from within the intimate boundaries of the family through home visits and meetings. Yet despite these resonances, parenting television is definitely *not* presented as the progeny of state social work; far from it. Parenting television is cleansed of a history of inspection and surveillance through a discourse of entrepreneurship; whilst state interventions are involuntary and other-directed, and carry resonances of failure, shame and stigma, reality TV operates under the principle that participants *choose* to receive professionalized expertise in order to remake themselves. In this section I examine the relationship between state social work and professional expertise, and explore the usefulness and the limitations of the rhetorical distinction that some accounts draw.

In Chapter 5, I argued that contemporary parenting culture rehearses a psychological approach to the newly 'responsibilized' subject, and that this psychologised subject intersects with neoliberal notions of the pure, elective relationship which is free from constraint and power. I argued that the notion of a subject, cleansed of history, is gendered and classed in particular ways that we need to attend to. In their work on American reality

television, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay (2008) argue that it should be read as a cultural technology which dispenses powerful citizenship prescriptions around conducting oneself as an idealized citizen-subject. They claim that reality TV has 'reinvented social work' by intertwining post-welfare personal responsibility with traditionalist morality. In this reinvention, the 'science of social living' that was espoused and implemented by the social work of the nineteenth and twentieth century, has been recast and neo-liberalised. The post-welfare discourse of personal responsibility emphasizes choice and empowerment, self-entrepreneurialism and commerce. These concepts are powerful mechanisms through which the responsibilised subject is signified, assumed and produced by post-welfare policy.

Ouellette and Hay's research examines reality television principally in the United States, but they also consider the accusations emanating from British journalists concerning the 'Nanny state' and what they have interpreted as the paternalist micro-managing of private life by the state. Ouellette and Hay argue that there is an important distinction between privately hired domestic nannies, parenting advisors and life-coaches, and state-directed social workers. Privately arranged interventions, such as those of TV supernannies, are constructed through the language of choice and empowerment;

Whilst the term 'nanny state' implies that official intervention in social life is paternalistic and therefore wrong, the TV nanny governs within the private context of commercial television, which makes her interventionist approach to reforming family life not only

tolerable, but in sync with rationalities of welfare privatization and personal responsibility.

(2008: 94)

Ouellette and Hay argue that the proliferation of reality TV, and in particular a genre they refer to as 'life interventions', continue to undermine already-precarious welfare claims in the United States, by constituting social work within the cultural economy of commercial television. Drawing on the work of Nikolas Rose, Ouellette and Hay suggest that cultural technologies such as life intervention television translates authority into 'diffuse guidelines for living with no obvious connection to official government, formal laws or regulatory procedures' (2008: 67). Whilst they are careful to assert that these emerging 'governmentalities' are *not* the result of a 'conspiratorial process, nor is it predictable or seamless' (ibid), *nonetheless* these guidelines, fostered and mobilized by television enterprise, do 'the work that the State no longer has to do' (2008: 66). There is no formal connection between life intervention television and social work – and yet the diffusing of these governmentalities does serve the unintended purpose of diminishing the social insurance expected of the welfare state.

I want to consider whether Ouellette and Hay's conception of a post-welfare, neoliberal governmentality that is produced through the television intervention (amongst other technologies) holds up to scrutiny within the UK in the same way as they argue that it does in the United States. I argue that the particularities of the US and UK welfare contexts means that we need to be cautious about drawing parallels between the two. Whilst their

model of the reinvention of social work, through the dissemination of idealized citizen-subjectivities, is useful, I argue that within the UK, there is a more complicated relationship between culture and policy, particularly in light of recent 'responsibilising' policy around parenting.

Nicholas Rose, whose theoretical model of governmentality underpins Ouellette and Hay's work, provides a useful distinction between social insurance and social work, suggesting that the former is inclusive and solidaritive and the latter individualizing and responsibilizing. Social insurance for Rose was one of the ways in which the risks and dangers of wage labour, of a body vulnerable to sickness and injury, were collectivized under the stewardship of a 'social' State that emerged in the early twentieth century. This social State took responsibility for its citizens through the emergence of, for example, the 'cradle-to-grave' welfare system, public housing schemes and legislation on child-care, health and safety. Social work, on the other hand, operates as a space in which problematic cases are scrutinized and adjudicated, producing social duties, pathologised behaviours and targeted intervention.

The everyday practices of living, the hygienic care of household members, the previously trivial features of interactions, were to be anatomized by experts, rendered calculable in terms of norms and deviations, judged in terms of their social costs and consequences and subject to regimes of education or reformation. (1996: 49)

Both social insurance and social work are, for Rose, the principle axes upon which social government could arise. Rose examines how this social government came under gradual but sustained fire; from economic critics who lambasted the 'unproductive' welfare sector; from libertarians suspicious of the social control of deviance; from within the empire of social expertise itself, as various specialisms fought over their subjects; as well as from critical movements such as feminism and anti-psychiatry. He argues that the rationalities of social government shifted rhetorically towards an 'advanced liberal', or to use the term that Rose and many others prefer, 'neoliberal' rationality. I have discussed the characteristics of neoliberalism extensively in this thesis. In Chapter 4 I argued that significant political and rhetorical shifts have happened, from the language of injustice and inequality, to the language of opportunity, aspiration and risk-management. I argued that parenting has become a key site through which these shifts are being articulated, particularly in the shift of policy attention from 'poverty' to 'poor parenting'. I want now to explore in more detail Rose's discussion of neoliberalism, which is both useful and prudent, set out as it is in three characteristics. I will return to these three characteristics in the final section of this concluding chapter, by way of demonstrating where I think Ouellette and Hay's model of post-welfarism falls short in the UK.

First, neoliberal governmentality reconfigures the relationship between expertise and politics. Enclosures of expertise are subjected to the critical scrutiny of the 'grey sciences' (accountancy, audit and budgetary disciplines), welfare agencies become 'purchasers' of

services, and 'audit' replaces 'trust' in terms of government's assessment of the credentials of professionals.

Second, 'social' technologies have pluralized, and the single functioning network that was assembled by social governments in the twentieth century has been disassembled and fractured into various 'autonomous' entities, 'enterprises, organizations, communities, professionals, individuals' (1996:56). Rose signals his suspicion of this disassembling process, pointing to the apolitical claims made by 'quangos' (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations), the vogue for targets, indicators and performance measures, new techniques and networks of accountability and the rise of 'evidence-based policy' culture. Competition, quality and customer demand have replaced service and dedication. Representation of community partners on council boards have replaced electoral mechanisms, as part of this wider shift towards new forms of distance governmentality.

Third, the subject of government is no longer a subject-citizen, but rather a 'client', 'customer', or 'consumer'. Individuals are compelled to become 'self-enterprising', authors of their own destinies and maximize their experience of life through choices. Correspondingly, 'individuals are to fulfill their national obligations not through their relations of dependency and obligation to one another, but through seeking to *fulfil themselves* within a variety of micro-moral domains or 'communities' (1996: 57, original emphasis). This 'civilising project' of self-enterprise is actualized through what Rose calls 'grammars of living' which are widely disseminated yet apparently operate independent of

political direction. Thus the goals of advanced liberalism become translated into individual choices and commitments of the individual. Importantly for Rose, this third characteristic of neo-liberalism transforms both social insurance and social work. Social insurance becomes a private matter of risk management, 'conceived in terms of calculable dangers and avertable risks' (1996: 58), whilst social work, under the auspices of the civilizing project, requires a new binding between expert and individual – the private counsellor, the self-help manual and the telephone helpline, to list Rose's examples.

There is something interesting happening in Oullette and Hay's use of Rose's 'neoliberal' definition which needs untangling. In their work they focus on Rose's third characteristic at the expense of the first two. Whilst this may be a reflection of the US context in which they are writing, than the robustness of their line of argument, it is worth unpacking what *doesn't* take place within their analysis by way of illuminating what *does* need to be explored within the UK context. When Oullette and Hay claim that 'the shows [*Supernanny* and those of the same genre] 'help' middle-class families as opposed to welfare citizens' (2008: 95), they are responding first to actual, material differences in the tone, pacing and selection processes between the UK and US version of *Supernanny*³. Importantly, they are

³ There are important differences between the UK and US versions of *Supernanny* but unfortunately a detailed comparison is outside the scope of this thesis. Briefly, the Britishness of Jo Frost is fetishized in the US version; she watches footage of screaming children on a laptop whilst travelling to the family home in the back of a black London taxi. Frost herself has remarked on the romance attached to her (British) accent by American audiences (see Chapter 4); this compares to the mocking imitation of this (working-class, regional, Cockney) accent by my research participants (see Chapter 7). In terms of participating families, the US version is predominantly white and exclusively two-parent, as opposed to the UK version which is more mixed in terms of single-parent families, and exclusively white (with the exception of one bi-racial family). Participating US families are also much more homogenous in terms of class; an

also writing within a context in which there is a less developed language for articulating class nuances; for example, where the opposite of 'middle class' is, must be and can only ever be 'welfare'. Significantly, by only addressing the third of Rose's neoliberal characteristics, Ouellette and Hay's post-welfare model does not take account of the ways in which parenting is not only a site where the self-enterprising individual is produced. Parenting is also a site which has been increasingly colonized by the grey sciences, by audit and by forms and technologies of distance governmentality. I return to this point in the concluding section of this chapter.

This reading of intervention TV as a recasting of social work does seem compelling; though perhaps not simply for the middle classes. Intervention TV, and encounters with that by viewers, can itself be read as a space in which the complexity of class and status anxiety are played out. In this vein, Ron Becker (2006: 186), also examining the US version of *Supernanny*, remarks that the help offered by the television expert is 'privatized rather than socialized', and as such sidesteps the stigma of receiving family expertise from a professionalized outside source. In his reading of the US version of *Supernanny* alongside the American programme *Nanny 911*⁴, Becker argues that both programmes work to load social responsibility onto (two-parent, heterosexual, financially autonomous) families, a

exploratory examination suggests they are principally lower middle-class. In the UK version, working-class families are over-represented.

⁴ *Nanny 911* was broadcast by Fox from 2004 and was a competitor with the ABC broadcast *Supernanny*, and featured three British nannies; again their Britishness was something of a fetish and the three nannies wore caps and cloaks, taught table manners and etiquette and also featured a Butler.

household structure that remains 'ideologically central, even as it becomes demographically marginal' (2006: 185). Signalling the deeply-ingrained US suspicions around state involvement in private families, Becker argues that the notion of a primetime television programme called *Supersocialworker* or *Child Protection Services 911* hardly seems possible within this highly individualized post-welfare television climate.

But is this necessarily the case? Can we continue to draw a clean distinction between the transformative makeovers and transformations that are offered up in psychologised sites such as reality television, and the highly individualized state support offered to citizen-subjects? Some social and media theorists have argued that we can. Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2008), commenting on the UK side of the Atlantic pond, follow Becker's conclusions and state that 'a programme such as *Supersocialworker* is literally inconceivable' (2008: 8). Although they regard the help offered by the 'privatized' TV nanny and the 'socialized' state social worker as similar in practical terms, they also suggest that former has become sought after, even prized, whilst the latter continues to signify a specific shameful failure;

Social or health worker intervention is highly undesirable, rendered unpalatable by its classed connotations and out-moded by post-welfarist notions of the role of the state. But self-help supported by other kinds of experts (counsellors, therapists, nutritionists, financial advisors etc) bears no such associations as these are often privately paid for by the more affluent in the medical, therapy and lifestyle marketplace (2008: 8)

In this extension of the discussion of social work and reality TV to take account of some of the classed resonances of being 'helped', Biressi and Nunn uphold the distinctions drawn between socialized and privatized social work drawn by their US based contemporaries. In this thesis, I have mapped out what I consider to be the Bourdiean field of parenting; a field in which different capitals may be played in the pursuit of symbolic capital and through this, the securing of symbolic power. I argue for a finer, more nuanced mesh of analysis than the one offered here. Can we draw a clean line between 'privatized' and 'socialized' parenting interventions; the field seems much more complex than this. In Chapter 6 I argued for theorizing the social subject as also a spatial subject, exploring in more detail the difference that classed, gendered and racialised geographies make to parenting. I endeavoured to re-contextualise the parental subject; a subject who is imagined in both parenting advice and parenting policy to exist in a spatial vacuum. Amongst the services available in the neighbourhood I examined were self-help parenting services, such as life-coaching for mothers returning to employment, 'de-cluttering' and domestic organization services, and privately hired nutritionists and counselors. This would support my contention that the neighbourhood of East Dulwich has been 'parentally gentrified'; that its gentrification is happening principally through the goods, services and spaces that it can offer to parents. It is important to note that the value attached to the use of these services is different from that (if any) attached to seeking the help of Jo Frost and the *Supernanny* team. This is despite the 'privatised' rubric that they share. As many of my participants asked, who would agree to

go on such a programme? It was hard for some of the participants, living amongst all these services that they could afford and felt entitled to, to imagine agreeing to such a resort.

Similarly, is the concept of 'supersocialworkers' really as inconceivable as Biressi and Nunn maintain? Life intervention or makeover television is undeniably a commercial space (in which audience ratings must be maximized in order to generate advertising revenue from commercial breaks), yet this commercial context does not necessarily sever the tie between the television intervention and neoliberal governmentalities. There are many examples of reality television, particularly within the 'docu-soap' tradition, which focus absolutely upon the everyday work of government and borough council officials, including environmental health inspectors (*Life of Grime*, BBC1, 1999) traffic wardens (*Traffic Cops*, BBC1, 2003-present; *Car Wars*, BBC1, 2007) hospital workers and medical staff (*Doctors at Large*, BBC2 1998; *Children's Hospital*, BBC1, 1996-1999) city coroners (*The Coroner* Channel 4, 2005) and police officers (*Police, Camera, Action!* ITV, 1994-2000). The distinctions between supernannies and supersocialworkers may not be as clear as Biressi and Nunn presume. Amanda Holt (2008) has documented the ways in which these distinctions have been crossed; how watching a parenting television programme (*Driving Mum and Dad Mad*) has been incorporated into a support course for the parents of young offenders, whilst another Youth Offending Team parenting support course was filmed and edited into a reality TV programme. In light of these kinds of blurring between sites of youth justice, parenting support and media culture, 'supersocialworkers' appear to be not only possible, but probable.

Within the specific context of UK political culture, and in light of recent policy developments and proposals that circle particularly around the success of parenting television programmes, the distinction between socialized and privatized social work needs to be fleshed out. In the UK, contrary to the conclusions drawn by Ouellette and Hay, Becker and Biressi and Nunn, programmes such as *Supernanny* have not ideologically cordoned private family life off from the apparatus of the state. In fact the opposite process has happened. I turn now to the ways in which the popularity of this kind of television, and specifically of *Supernanny*, has been actively drawn on as evidence in itself of the need for more sustained parenting interventions by the state. This, I argue, demonstrates that parenting, and specifically 'poor parenting', has become a principle site for the extension of Rose's neoliberal grey sciences, audit technologies and distance governmentality.

Interpreting the popularity of *Supernanny*

The relationship between privatised and socialised social work, blurred by television programmes used in parenting intervention and parenting interventions filmed for television, is complicated further in the UK by the sustained references to parenting television by policy makers and ministers. The popularity of these has been read as confirmation of the need for further government action in supporting parents. *Supernanny*

in particular has become iconic in these citations, and several ministers have publicly stated their interpretation of its popularity as a public 'hunger' and 'demand' for state interventions in family life:

Government too must extend the opportunities for parents to develop their expertise; the popularity of Supernanny exemplifies the hunger for information and for effective parenting programmes that parents often express to me.

Beverley Hughes, Secretary for Children, Schools and Families, keynote speech at Institute for Public Policy in November 2006

Jamie Oliver rightly landed on school meals and said 'we are feeding children such bad food that they cannot sit down in the classroom' and I think the millions watching TV about parenting are saying the same thing to government.

Louise Casey, head of Respect Unit, interview with Patrick Wintour, July 2006

Parents are demonstrating a growing appetite for discussion, information and advice, as we see from the increasingly vibrant market in television programmes, magazines and websites.

Alan Johnson, Health Secretary, foreword to Every Parent Matters (DFES)

These kinds of citations are interesting for several reasons. First of all, in a collapse of private and public worlds, these citations infer that watching television becomes a political act, an act of 'saying something to government', which we need to be cautious about. Are

parents watching *Supernanny* saying anything to government or is this an attempt to transform popular culture into populist policy (Laclau, 2005). To read the first as a space for commercialised social work and the latter as the realm of socialised social work renders invisible the ways in which the two have been mutually constitutive within the UK context.

Second, these citations gloss over the complex cultural processes of viewing that I have examined in this thesis. These programmes are produced as a spectacle and as entertainment, which undoubtedly swells audiences, but this context is erased in political discussion, as are the *pleasures* of judgement and scrutiny offered up through this kind of television. Much feminist cultural scholarship, which has informed this thesis, has critically examined the veneers of 'taste' and 'style' under which social class is 'loudly euphemised' and disseminated in much makeover television (McRobbie, 2004; Fairclough, 2005; Skeggs, 2005). It seems quite remarkable how little sense there is in these ministerial citations of the processes of screening families for the 'juiciest' bad behaviour, or of the ruthless editing and post-production, and how these processes might produce programming which is compelling for 'millions of parents' precisely because of its spectacular entertainment value. Thomas Mathiesen (1997) wittily remarked that Foucault's 'panopticon' might be recast within reality television as a 'synopticon' – 'the many' watching and scrutinising 'the many' – and the pleasures of this synoptic judgement are, as I have demonstrated, real and deserve our attention.

Third is the significance placed within these citations upon a notion of an authentic, inner intimacy that parents are bringing to the programme, both in their participation and their viewing. This notion chimes comfortably with the claim that parents 'demand' and 'hunger' for this kind of advice and that the authentic desires of parents are accessible via the evidence of ratings – that finally, we can know 'what parents really want' – and precludes a sustained consideration of how demands and needs are themselves regulated and produced discursively through the very governmentalities that construct parenting as part of a civilising project.

The exaggerated sense of crisis that is produced within the programmes through selection and editing and through staging scenes of antagonism is also produced within political talk through a confused and often contradictory sense of 'late modernity'. Many feminist and queer theorists have questioned how useful the concept of 'the family' is within this cultural moment (see for example Roseneil and Budgeon, 2008), whilst others have explored the impact of transnationalism and globalisation upon notions of 'the family' (Reynolds, 2005). In spite of this, and despite the political vogue for speaking of 'families' rather than '*the* family' (see Williams, 2004), this notion of the nuclear family continues to be a tenacious idea in policy circles and in the ways that policy addresses parents. Discourses of the 'family in crisis', which produce a sense of incompatibility between proliferating obligations facing modern subjects – as parent, worker, citizen – and of the 'loss' of the extended family, continue to reify this re-nuclearising. There is a political incoherence around how to approach these problems, with little empirical attention paid to, for example, the huge

amount of childcare provided by grandparents. Meanwhile, the informal solutions that some families create have themselves been problematised and rendered dangerous *because* they cannot be regulated and standardised⁵. Policy and political rhetoric does not simply reflect the state of the family, but produces it. The production of a nation of parents who are in crisis, do not know how to parent, and require intervention and management by professionals, is produced through the text of *Supernanny* – but it is also produced through the ways in which this text is politically interpreted.

The popularity of the programme, and the subsequent political (mis)reading of this popularity has resulted in a number of perhaps predictable, and certainly clichéd, comparisons being drawn between Frost and the ministers who have referenced her programme. One particularly salient and recurring comparison was between Frost and then-head of the Respect Unit, Louise Casey. Harking back to the Mary Poppins symbolism I discussed in Chapter 4, Casey has often been described as the ‘State Supernanny’ as this following extract from an interview in *The Telegraph* demonstrates:

She takes a spoonful of sugar to council estates, she expects the rich to keep their toys tidy and she wants the middle classes to know where their children are at 10pm. The ‘respect tsar’ believes that children can only have fun if they know their boundaries. Liberals have

⁵ See for example the case in 2009 of two women police officers whose informal childcare swapping arrangement led to their investigation by OFSTED, because neither were registered childminders but both were providing care ‘with reward’ (i.e. receiving childcare in return).

attacked her for being too strident and the Right have attacked her for not waving her umbrella enough. Tony Blair, however, thinks she is practically perfect in every way. (Sylvester and Thomson, 2007)

The ambivalence around parenting interventions – whether socialised or privatised (however useful this distinction is), whether recommended by social workers or sought by parents appearing on *Supernanny* – can be seen in the uncertain commentary that greeted the announcement in 2006 of a national network of parenting advisors. This was reported across the majority of newspapers as ‘an army of Supernannies’, and the tone of much of this reporting suggested an uncertainty about whether this represented (‘yet another’) example of the ‘meddling’ in private family life, or a much-needed state intervention in ungovernable and chaotic families.

We can discern, both within New Labour and within parenting television, an obsession with method, as opposed to a more subtle, nuanced approach that takes account of the complex psychosocial processes involved in parenting and in becoming a parental subject. The experiential aspects of being gendered, classed and racialised as parents in particular ways, and the investments parents may have in particular forms and ways of parenting that are rooted within their histories, genealogies and communities, are absent from this approach, which frames parenting within the framework of ‘parental skills’.

Difference and complexity is flattened, and 'good parenting' is sketched out as a universal, learnable 'skill' requiring management, in a transfer of the language of the workplace. Parenting classes, parenting academies, *Supernanny* 'techniques', and the focus of behavioural strategies recasts the family itself as a site of conflict – conflict and problems are only thinkable *within* the family, not between the family and other institutions. 'Poor parenting', as I have argued, is being held increasingly accountable for wider problems, most importantly for 'social exclusion'. The rhetoric of 'social exclusion', and the a-structural preference for the condition of 'being excluded' prevents us, in a sleight of hand, from thinking through who is doing the excluding (Fairclough, 2000). In the national myths of 'perpetual progress and upward mobility' (Heller, 2006: 3) and the seductive power of transforming oneself, bettering oneself and learning how to overcome crisis through better (self)management, we cease to look critically at the injustices of a society that continues to be marked by immobility and real, material obstacles (for those at the bottom). Ruth Levitas (2005), whose work I explored in Chapter 4, brilliantly deconstructs New Labour's verbal shifts from equality/inequality to inclusion/exclusion, from job security to employability. For Levitas, New Labour has a distinctive *performative* (rather than structural) understanding of inclusion and exclusion, and we can see these same shifts within the field of parenting. As in makeover television, this politics suffers from a wider unthinkability of collectivity, and solutions to problems of living are about managing oneself, cultivating skills and individual improvement through expertise.

In terms of poor parenting, we can see what Levitas calls a 'moral underclass discourse' in which exclusion is caused by *culture*, and changing one's cultural behaviour (by watching a parenting television programme or attending a parenting course) is seen as a guarantee of social inclusion. 'Poor parenting' as a set of ideas has become the inheritor of older ideas of the moral underclass, of cycles of deprivation, and of a culture of disadvantage and a poverty of aspiration. Political talk, such as the earlier quoted examples, rhetorically calls upon a universal body of parents who are equally 'hungry' for parental guidance, the parenting proposals soon slip neatly into a much more specific imagined set of parents; the abnormally chaotic, the extreme, those that are really struggling to cope. We are all watching *Supernanny*, but of course (this rhetoric assures us), we don't all need to be visited. This talk replicates, perhaps at a meta-level, the same kinds of projective processes around identifying and (mis)recognising good and bad parents that I examined in Chapter 8. This is demonstrated across numerous speeches given by Tony Blair, the principle architect and constant champion of the framework of 'early years' interventions, such as in the following:

The toughest thing anyone faces in their personal life is bringing up children. Its rewarding. Wonderful. But at times, painful, frustrating and demoralizing. Being a parent is hard and most of us just have to get on and do it. But there are some families who just can't cope with it [...] *no one's talking about interfering in normal family life*"

Tony Blair, 2006, emphasis added.

Pre-empting the accusations of the 'Nanny state', perhaps, these supportive proposals suddenly become coercive and punitive, for some parents. But which parents? Proposals linking 'support' and welfare were made in 2007, suggesting that compulsory parenting classes be introduced and that receiving benefits become conditional with attendance.

'Poor parenting', of course, is always related to being poor. Within this context, questions need to be raised about whether we can position state-funded and state-led expertise as 'just another form of advice' that parents can choose from. In Chapter 1, I examined how powerful the tropes around choice and empowerment have become within the postfeminist landscape of parental advice, yet we must not presume that choice is not evenly distributed, particularly for parents who receive any kind of welfare assistance. We need to question in whose interests these notions of free choice operate, and the mechanisms of power that discourses of 'choice' disguises and elides. Which parents are permitted to choose, which are able to refuse and who decides which advice are they able to choose?

This neoliberal sketching out of the notion of 'poor parenting' is still in its early stages, but it is already, in a relatively short period of time, far down the path of becoming institutionalized and operationalized through state-regulated and funded programmes, including Sure Start and National Family and Parenting Institute, as well as being diffused through other institutions such as the courts, schools, social work and education. We can see how the ideas behind 'poor parenting', making sense of it as a cultural and moral deficiency, are mobilizing much a much longer and older tradition of individualizing inequality. These individualizing processes point to how the intimate public sphere

(Berlant, 1997) has been constituted through and around intimate relationships such as parenting, which remains, itself, marked by social difference such as social class, gender and race.

In this thesis, I have employed an alternative, psychosocial model of subjectivity, one which approaches the 'self' as an interface between the social and the psychic, that is never fully complete and always in flux, impartial and contradictory. The parents that I worked with certainly brought their complex histories, biographies and investments to the programme, but they also did a great deal of identity work *through* their encounters with the programmes. As I have explored in Chapters 7 and 8, responding to the narrative drama on the screen became an opportunity to situate oneself within the contemporary parenting landscape. In a sense, expressing preferences or distrust of particular parenting techniques serves as a metaphor for other kinds of social difference. Nodding in agreement, or otherwise, at the Naughty Step technique for example (which *Supernanny* has helped to popularise, and which indeed has become a cultural shorthand for the programme) enables parents to position themselves in relation to discourses around child development, lifestyle, gender and social class. For some parents, the disciplinary focus of *Supernanny* became a theme of their criticism of the programme, whilst for others it provided a comforting notion that the complexities of everyday life can be remedied and rendered knowable through a set of simple rules, a how-to guide or a recipe for living. Being able to articulate their specific parenting philosophies through engaging with the programme, and referring

to other televisual examples they were familiar with or preferred, was an instance of the display and deployment of specific cultural competences and capitals.

Parenting television programmes operationalise 'parenting' as a formulaic set of skills that can be learned within a fixed time-frame and according to a set of universally applicable principles. From one episode to the next, parenting becomes visually confirmed as a way of erasing socioeconomic differences and guaranteeing that once all children are 'parented' according to the same principles, the experience of *all* families is better, happier and more productive. These notions are embedded within the contemporary cultural moment that we live in; a therapeutic moment which demands that we become deft in the management of our hearts, articulate in emotional vocabularies and confident, competent governors of our psychological health (Rose, 1999; Illouz, 2007).

The popularity of programmes such as *Supernanny*, once noted by government ministers, becomes itself an object for knowledge. Stating its interest in the reasons behind this popularity, the government-funded organization, the National Family and Parenting Institute, commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a poll. The final report of this recounted that huge numbers of the population were tuning in to parenting television shows, 'with *Supernanny* emerging as a clear winner', watched by forty-two percent of all adults. Many people reported to the poll that they were putting into practice the parenting techniques suggested by these programmes, that the programmes served as reassuring comparisons to their own family lives and that they welcomed the suggestions made; although the survey

also found that 'sizeable minorities' of respondents expressed their uncertainties about the advice, or concern for the welfare of the children that participated in such programming. The report concluded that those producing and commissioning such programmes have a responsibility towards an entire generation of adults, suggesting perhaps a return to the ethics of public service broadcasting, with an emphasis on education⁶. The pedagogical reading of parenting programmes, both in this report and by government officials generally, should be located within the ministerial willingness to use and appear on reality television as a form of reaching out to electorate.⁷

When government ministers interpret the popularity of parenting programmes as evidence that parents want support in learning the 'right' ways to interact with their children, they do so without attending to the great deal of identity work that is done through these visual encounters. This identity work includes judgement, pleasure, investment and reassurance, but it cannot be deduced or known through interview or survey alone. These methods

⁶ For a full report of the Ipsos MORI poll, see <http://www.familyandparenting.org/item/1284>

⁷ The obvious example here is when then-Education Minister Alan Johnson appeared on *Jamie's School Dinners* and pledged to increase the amount of funding available in order to improve the quality of meals served in schools. His willingness to acquiesce to Oliver's demands was undermined somewhat by a subsequent cabinet reshuffle, which (conveniently?) removed Johnson from the education portfolio before his promise could be fulfilled. Another more disturbing example happened in 2008, when Channel 5 broadcast a four-part programme called *Banged Up*. Fronted by the ex-Home Secretary David Blunkett, the 'social experiment' placed ten 'troublemaking' teens in an ex-prison to give them a taste of the prison life which it is assumed they are heading towards. Blunkett claimed that the programme was an opportunity for the participants to have a 'second chance', overlooking the sometimes damaging consequences of appearing on such programmes (for an excellent investigation of this, see the documentary *Poverty and the Media*, produced by Spectacle, 2010).

presume rationality and mastery over ourselves – that we always know how we feel. The complexity and fragility of the self is such that we may not ourselves know how we feel.

The Ipsos MORI survey upholds the notion that parenting television can be understood as a democratic popularising of parenting advice that would previously have been delivered through pamphlets, books and manuals; and that, as such, programme makers have a responsibility to educate appropriately. I have argued that the very visuality of these programmes sets them apart from other kinds of advice (though they are, of course, a legacy of the industry) in complex ways. They represent a specific moment in therapeutic culture in which 'parenting' has taken centre stage as a mechanism through which the interior psychological health of our families may be ruminated upon, and the psychological health of families on the television screen may be held out to judgement and scrutiny. The complex and uneven ways in which the parents from my research viewed, assessed and articulated themselves in conversation with the ideas of these programmes suggests that the visual encounter with parenting television – much like encounters with instructional, how-to-live reality television more generally – constitutes another site in which social difference is lived. The responses to the Ipsos MORI poll, criticizing the programme or expressing misgivings about the ethical issues it raises, can be interpreted not simply as 'how parents feel' about the programme, but also as an attempt to demonstrate their critical mastery of it. In Chapter 7 I examined the ways in which evaluating *Supernanny* (and other examples of parenting culture), assessing and perhaps even refusing it, was an opportunity to create value for oneself as a critical viewer and an evaluative and reflexive parent. Standing up to

Supernanny, then, is not simply a matter of refusing parenting culture; rather, it is another way of playing one's hand in the game of parental distinction.

'Our children need warmth not wealth': evaluating *Sure Start*

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the constitution of an intimate public sphere has been at the expense of the sociological imagination of social inequality. Inequality, or rather social exclusion, is now examined through a lens of individual competence and intimate management of the self. Parenting is a key site where competence and management is visualized; by this logic, it is through good parenting that children will be able to develop into aspirational successful subjects, and through poor parenting that social disadvantages will be transmitted across the generations. The impact of social, environmental, and material structural factors upon life-chances are silenced, through recourse to these individualizing discourses that centre upon parenting.

In this final concluding section, I want to demonstrate the tenacity of these shifts, from sociological imagination to psychological self-management, in the extension of what

Nicholas Rose has called the governmental grey sciences of audit into intimate childrearing relationships. In her reading of the ways in which the field of parenting has become colonized by mainstream developmental psychology professionals, Amanda Holt (2009) considers the ways in which psychometric tools have been employed to 'objectively' measure child development. She points to the increasing dominance of these measures within family policy and practice, and suggests that families in particular open up a discursive space between the private and public spheres, the space of 'the social'. These developmental milestones, although promising to reveal natural or normal development, are social constructions made by white, middle-class, heterosexual professionals and based around research with predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual mothers. These normative milestones reveal rather narrow experiences of parenting, and pathologise any of the broad developmental experiences or mothering strategies that are considered to be outside of the 'normal range', including those of black, working-class or disabled children or mothers (Steedman, Urwin and Walkerdine, 1985). Within the contemporary political context, the discourse of 'evidence-based policy' has become particularly powerful, and yet the ways in which evidence, knowledge and norms are constructed become increasingly elided. Holt argues that these processes of collecting evidence, which is used to determine and document whether parents are competent or incompetent, parents are discursively produced as both subjects and objects of knowledge. She contextualizes this production within the landscape of 'risk'; it is 'parental behavior', (rather than the social world or structural differences), defined as more or less 'risky', that determines outcomes of children.

There have been a whole raft of interventionist measures which attempt to micro-manage those parental behavior defined by professionals as 'risky'. Holt is interested in Parenting Orders, a measure which compels parents to attend compulsory parenting classes and carries the threat of conviction if breached; and which, as Holt points out, can be given to parents who haven't committed any crime, in response to their children who haven't committed any crime. Parenting Orders are one controversial measure where the meanings around welfare and justice, support and coercion are being redrawn in complex ways as part of the extension and stretching of parental causality (Furedi, 2001). I want here to consider another measure implemented by government, the Sure Start programme, which seeks to define and categorize parental inadequacy. Sure Start is discursively haunted by the same kinds of micro-management discourses that narrate parental transformation in cultural texts such as *Supernanny*.

Upon its inaugural term in 1997, New Labour firmly located the family and parenting as a principle arena of political concern. A series of policy proposals, consultation documents, green and white papers emerged, the first significant being the influential green paper *Supporting Parents* (Home Office, 2008), which was used as a guiding template across several government departments for the next decade. As I have explored in Chapters 3 and 4, through the instilling of a set of parenting skills and competencies, New Labour promised to transform the social landscape of inequality. Richenda Gambles (forthcoming) examines a range of these documents and charts several emerging discourses interweaving parenting

and social inclusion. Parenting is constructed within these documents as the most profound influence on the aspirations and opportunities of a child, and 'good parenting' becomes a guarantee of social success, achievement and, it is inferred, mobility. It is worth returning to Nicholas Rose's three characteristics of neoliberal governmentality as a way of illuminating how parenting practice has been ringfenced by New Labour as a key, perhaps the central, plank in their 'civilising' project. We can discern not only a recasting of parent citizens as customers, clients or users of services, seeking to fulfil themselves through self-enterprising consumption of expertise (Rose's third characteristic), but also a rise of the 'grey sciences' in evaluating the success of parenting initiatives, as well as a 'quango-isation' of parenting support (his first and second).

Sure Start, New Labour's flagship scheme for deprived under-fives, was inspired and takes its lead in many ways from a US equivalent, Head Start. Head Start was introduced in the 1960s under an 'invest now and save later' rhetoric, in which the direction of state funds into family intervention in the early years was argued to reduce the likelihood of poverty as children grow older and entered adulthood. One much-touted 'factoid' around Head Start was that a dollar spent on under-fives would eventually save seven dollars by the time those children reached thirty years of age, by reducing the likelihood of spending time in institutions such as prison or mental health institutions, of claiming welfare benefits and improving their chances of being self-reliant through education and later employment. Sure Start was launched nationally in 2001 under a similar rhetoric, with the stated aim of providing 'joined up services' for deprived children, including a range of services such as

mother-and-toddler groups, parenting classes, health visitor services, childcare for parents seeking employment, training schemes and speech therapy. The scheme was funded centrally but implemented locally, with the idea that local demands would direct the specific programs of each neighbourhood centre.

The Sure Start programme was politically earmarked as a scheme which would intervene on a micro-level upon the practices of disadvantaged parents, and in doing so, on the lives of disadvantaged children. Through the provision of parenting classes, speech and language development professionals, and of course by propelling unemployed 'parents' (that is, single mothers) into work, Sure Start was imagined as an intensive set of interventions that would transform disadvantaged neighbourhoods. By framing the problem of disadvantage in this way, Sure Start reproduces the notion that disadvantage is caused by and facilitated through incompetent parenting, rather than through structural and social inequality. In terms of solutions, the socio-spatial process of identifying neighbourhoods that 'require' the presence of a Sure Start centre is done in reference to benefit and welfare receipt; yet the solutions to these economic disadvantages are cultural.

The complexity of Sure Start and the localized formats within which each scheme has developed has necessarily made it a complicated scheme to evaluate. The head of its first independent evaluation, conducted by Birkbeck University in 2005, remarked that 'we are

in an unknown country without a map'⁸. The Birkbeck evaluation⁹ found that Sure Start had not impacted to a significant degree in the behaviour, development or language of the deprived families and communities that its Centres had been established in. The results of the evaluation were due to be published by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in October 2005, but following a leak in September, these findings provoked a brief but intense discussion across the broadsheet regarding the scheme.

Some critics pointed gleefully to the findings as evidence that the Sure Start scheme had been unsuccessful only in patching up the effects of 'poor parenting', rather than tackling the 'root causes'. Explanations of these root causes revolved principally around caricatures of fatherlessness and unemployment. Critics suggested that the only real way to tackle such parenting inadequacy is to promote marriage through tax breaks and to 'remove incentives' (Marin, 2005) and to stop 'loading the financial dice' (Phillips, 2005) towards single motherhood (read 'penalize unmarried mothers'). These cultural tropes surrounding 'poor parenting' rehearse and reproduce the marital moralizing of the Conservative government under both Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Post-Sure Start, this moralizing has been reconfigured as a more benign plea to tackle social exclusion. Social exclusion becomes

⁸ Birkbeck University in London in 2005, led by Professor Edward Melhuish and quoted in "We must hold our nerve and support deprived children", Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian* 13.09.05

⁹ It is important to note that the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) is coordinated by a unit at Birkbeck College, but each local programme is expected to develop a local evaluation strategy. The variety of projects that fall under the Sure Start umbrella requires that evaluation too is flexible. Many evaluations have been participatory, dialogic, qualitative. My challenge to Sure Start is less with these participatory programmes, and more with the rubric of operationalising intimacy in a wider sense and in a top-down direction. Where projects have been given the opportunity to develop their own indicators of success, they have been able to set their own agenda (See for example Sure Start West Peckham Local Evaluation, CUCR Goldsmiths, 2004).

something that the excluded *allow to happen to themselves*, by making 'poor choices' and by failing to manage their lives properly (that is, according to classed, raced and gendered normativities). When Sure Start, a set of micro-interventions that promised to teach better self-management to the socially excluded, failed to demonstrate results, the focus of the interventions was not questioned by critics. Rather, these critics explained the lack of improvements by focusing on the cultural un-governability of the chaotic subjects at its centre:

There is no doubt that there is a huge and growing problem of poorly parented children. But this is overwhelmingly the result of the breakdown of the family, which in some parts of the country has produced whole communities of fatherless children and with mothers mired in a vicious circle of inadequacy, isolation and poverty.

(Phillips, 2006, emphasis added)

'Poor parenting' discourse in these articles became ever more closely intertwined with familiar notions of moral sickness and urban decay:

The real problem for children *in inner cities* is family breakdown. Programmes such as Sure Start only tackle the symptoms, not the malady. *They aggravate the disease too*

(Marin, 2006, emphasis added)

In these accounts, the failure of Sure Start to meet its criteria of success serves as evidence that state intervention cannot compensate for the moral corrosion and 'poor parenting' that is seen to automatically arise from families outside the conventional two-parent nuclear ideal.

On the defence of Sure Start's undeniably embarrassing evaluation was Polly Toynbee, who claimed that the disappointing evaluation results from Birkbeck should not dissuade ministers from pursuing the scheme's agenda. Toynbee made a number of arguments endorsing the scheme. First, she suggested that the evaluation had happened too early for any discernible effect to have been measurably embedded, and that the scheme just needed more time. Second, she pointed out that many of the evaluated children may have had no contact with Sure Start, but had merely lived in the area; in neighbourhoods of high turnover she suggests that the children who had benefited may have moved elsewhere. Third, she indicated the one significant change that *had* been found by the evaluators as one of immense optimism; that Sure Start mothers demonstrated 'warmer parenting' as opposed to the control group, "with less hostility, less smacking, less negative criticism and more affection". Toynbee's comment piece ends with an appeal to continue with Sure Start's expansion, insisting upon the need for more, not less, intensive professional support.

In each of these responses to the evaluation, what is striking is the absence of any sustained discussion about the appropriateness of 'the grey sciences', of the inescapability of the rhetoric of audit and accounting and of the uncritical way in which notions of 'good', warm'

and 'poor' parenting have come to saturate discussion of the scheme. The centrality of audit, the grey sciences of intimacy management, make certain questions appear unnecessary, even distracting. How can we 'evidence' parent-child intimacy and warmth? And how does the process of evidencing, and then evaluating that evidence, in itself cement specific ideas about what counts as good, warm or poor parenting? In a more lucid commentary on the evaluation of Sure Start, Jennie Bristow (2005) suggests that the evaluation findings are largely inconsequential. What matters, Bristow argues, is the *process* of evidencing 'good' parenting and the evaluation of that evidence; this process of scrutinising 'intimate family dynamics' against a checklist of desirable behaviours and practices does a great deal of insidious work, namely constructing and subsequently regulating a particular performance of parenting which becomes wedded to notions of 'goodness'.

We might conclude that the weight of unreflective statistical accountability has become so heavy, meaning that none of the commentary surrounding this evaluation spent any energy considering what has been produced *through* the evaluation of Sure Start. Instead, their responses either herald the Birkbeck findings as 'proof' that intervention is ineffectual in guaranteeing 'good' parenting, or that it indicates that the Sure Start interventions have been too little, not intense enough, or evaluated too soon. What is in no doubt, across this commentary, is the existence of 'poorly parented children', and that it is poor parenting, above all else and to the exclusion of all else, that has stalled social mobility, led to urban decay, broken the family – and with it society – and created a generation of lawless

children. The power of these neoliberal discourses, and the 'statistical evidence' that is sought and found to prove it, can be demonstrated in the speed with which discussions around parents in poverty have so quickly become discussions about poor parenting.

In a speech delivered to the think-tank Demos, which in 2009 repeated the mantra that it was middle-class parental competence which guaranteed the success of middle-class children, David Cameron, leader of the Conservative Party and at the time of writing, the man who seems set to become the next Prime Minister, repeated these ideas:

Of course there is a link between material poverty and poor life chances, but the full picture is that that link also runs through the style of parenting that children in poor households receive. Research shows that, while responsible parenting is more likely to occur in wealthier households, children in poor households who are raised with that style of parenting do just as well. What matters most to a child's life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but that warmth of their parenting.

Cameron, 2010, speech to Demos

It is perhaps seductive to think that aspiration and attainment can be improved if all parents followed a specific vision for their parenting, if there were a straightforward recipe for parenting that could be taught to all. Why can't working-class parents just behave more like middle-class ones? How can we teach working-class parents to raise middle-class children (see Gewirtz, 2001)? But what this logic also does is suggest that parents in

'poorer' (working-class) households are deficient, irresponsible and cold. It replicates the same offensive myths and stereotypes around working-class parents, without challenging the material injustices that enable some parents to consolidate their advantages and privileges through their 'competent parenting' in the first place. What better way to undermine anger, than to suggest that we do not need more evenly distributed wealth, but rather better self-management, commitment to aspirations for our children, and the learning of 'warmth'? Where these discourses come together to form a knot around notions of competent, responsible parenting, they prevent us from looking at the wider gendered and classed normativities that produce that knot.

APPENDIX 1

The participants

These participants were recruited through a range of avenues, including an children's activity workshop, a mother's group and through personal introductions. These descriptions indicate the configuration of personal information they chose to reveal when asked to introduce and describe themselves. Their names have been changed.

Phillip is in his forties and works full-time as a furniture designer. He and his wife have two children, a boy and a girl. He self-defines as middle-class.

Louisa is in her forties, and lives with her partner. She is a part-time teacher and self-identified as middle-class and lesbian. They have one infant son.

Amy is in her forties and lives with her partner. She describes herself as heterosexual and middle-class. She has two preschool age children, one boy and one girl and she works freelance in the media.

Yvonne has two sons and works full-time as a childcare provider. She identifies as heterosexual and middle-class. She lives with her partner, and they are both in their forties.

Vanina is in her thirties, lives with her husband and works as a freelance photographer. She was born and raised in Brazil, and has lived in the UK for a number of years. Her and her husband have one daughter.

Helen is in her forties and lives with her husband. She works part-time as an art-teacher and artist. They have two children, one boy and one girl.

Jessica is in her thirties and is married. She and her husband are expecting their first child. Jessica is on maternity leave from her career as an architect. She self-defines as middle-class.

Emma defines as a lesbian and middle-class. She and her partner have one son and she works full-time in the field of cultural production.

Erica is in her thirties and works in a school. She has one daughter from a previous relationship and currently is single.

Clara is in her forties and is a stay-at-home mother to one daughter. She used to work in PR and plans to return to this in the future. She lives with her partner.

Elizabeth is in her forties and works part-time in a school. She has one daughter and lives with her partner.

Patrizia is a part-time child development worker. She was born in Germany and has lived in the UK for a number of years. She is in her forties, has one son and lives with her partner.

Jane has three children and is expecting another. She is a stay-at-home mum in her forties and lives with her partner.

Kelly has three children, two boys and a girl. She works infrequently as a midwife and is mostly at home with her children. She lives with her partner and describes herself as working-class and mixed race.

Susan is married and in her forties. She and her husband have two daughters. She works part-time in the charity sector.

Fiona has two daughters and lives with her husband. She is a stay-at-home mum but plans to return to her career in the future working for a health organisation. She self-defines as middle-class.

Samuel is in his thirties and works for as a technician for a media company. He and his partner have one daughter. Erik is originally from Norway and has lived in the UK for several years.

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